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**A Report on
the 29th PCA
General Assembly**



The Presbyterian Witness

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Striving for the purity and peace of the Presbyterian Church in America is the responsibility of all her members and officers. Therefore, the purpose of this magazine is to enhance the purity of doctrine, purity of life, unity in the Spirit, and diligence in mission of the Presbyterian Church in America.

God raised up our denomination to be a standard bearer of “the truth as it is in Jesus,” “the whole counsel of God,” as faithfully expressed in our historic standards. Our goal is that through our faithfulness to the Great Commission, “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:9).

We love the PCA and long to see it continue to be more and more reformed by the Word of God in its thinking and living. It is to that end that we pray God will use our magazine.

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A Report on the 29th PCA General Assembly by **Roger Schultz**

Mr. Schultz is a ruling elder at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Kingsport, Tennessee. He is involved in the educational ministry there and is also a professor at Virginia Interment College in Bristol, Tennessee.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) met in Dallas, June 19-22, and some 1250 commissioners (about 70% Teaching Elders, and 30% Ruling Elders) were present to handle the business of the church. With about a quarter of a million members, the PCA is the largest conservative Presbyterian denomination in the United States. The church is evangelical and conservative, though its Reformed and confessional commitments are increasingly vague and indistinct.

The PCA is divided between its Reformed and broadly evangelical wings. Some have joked that the real division is between the TRs (the truly Reformed) and the BRs (the barely Reformed). Printed on the canvas tote-bags each commissioner received was the theme for this year's Assembly: "Unity and Peace." This is a surprising slogan, considering the recent departure of Cedar Springs, one of the PCA's largest congregations, and the pending secession of Westminster Presbytery. Indeed, this exodus and threatened exodus from the church was the buzz in many General Assembly discussions.

The Secession of Westminster Presbytery

In the spring of 2001 Westminster Presbytery voted overwhelmingly to withdraw from the denomination. Covering southwestern Virginia and upper-east Tennessee, Westminster has long been considered the most conservative presbytery in the PCA. Established in 1973, even before the PCA was formally organized, Westminster was created as an Old School, Southern Presbyterian presbytery. Its founding documents are committed to "the plain language" and "original intention" of the Westminster divines – a powerful statement of "strict subscriptionist" confessional sentiments. And when it entered the PCA in 1974, Westminster Presbytery explicitly reserved the right to withdraw from the denomination, at any time, for reasons it deemed sufficient.

Westminster Presbytery has seen significant turmoil during the last two and half years. Many contend that the presbytery is split between Old School, zealously Reformed strict subscriptionists and broadly evangelical, New School system subscriptionists, and there is some merit in those categories. Some claim that this is a theonomy conflict, although theonomy hasn't been an issue in presbytery debates. It may be that the conflict is one between Old Timers (churches entering the PCA in the 1970s) and New Comers (those entering after 1980). Churches which didn't leave the

mainline denomination until ten years ago usually have different perspectives than those which left almost thirty years ago. The key issues in Presbytery debates have been Sabbath observance, the regulative principle of Scripture, the continuation of tongues, Christian education and, ultimately, the sufficiency of scripture.

I believe that the real trouble began in January of 1999, when a new caucus within the presbytery contested elections and tried to take over key committees. This was an unprecedented development (our Nominating Committee typically struggles to recruit enough candidates), which politicized and polarized the presbytery. Special targets of the take-over were the Mission to North America Committee and the control of a church planting work in Wytheville, Virginia. Members of the mission church soon complained of the heavy-handed treatment they received from the newly constituted Committee, and in the late spring of 1999, every member of the Wytheville mission transferred to a neighboring congregation.

Sometimes personalities were involved. In the summer of 2000, R.C. Sproul, Jr., sought to transfer into the presbytery. Some questions were raised about his views on the Sabbath, the regulative principle of worship, and paedocommunion (although exceptions are routinely granted on these issues, and in the past paedocommunion beliefs have not prevented admission to the presbytery). I think that the real issue was Christian education. (Sproul hates government schools.) Presbytery initially voted by a substantial margin to approve Sproul's examination and his transfer to presbytery. But in a surprising parliamentary maneuver, someone moved to reconsider the vote at the next meeting, at which time forces were marshaled to block Sproul's transfer. A complaint was brought against this egregious procedural abuse, but it was denied by presbytery.

At the same time, presbytery was subjected to bitter debates. Flurries of complaints, coming from both sides, necessitated numerous called meetings. Most of us grew weary of the extra meetings, especially when they lasted into the wee hours of the mornings. Elevated rhetoric also made people uneasy. Strict subscriptionists, for instance, were charged with being "Pharisees" and Reformed "fundamentalists." A series of extraordinary circumstances—a revelation of heresy, a confession of adultery, an officer's deposition, the prospect of ecclesiastical trials, and a pastor's threatened lawsuit against his congregation—have added to the presbytery's fatigue.

In the meantime, presbytery erected a special Committee on Conflict Resolution to deal with the problems. The Committee was unsuccessful in reducing conflict, and a Minority Report from the Committee eventually recommended that the presbytery split. In 2000, Westminster Presbytery overtured the General Assembly to divide the presbytery along state lines. Westminister Presbytery would continue in Virginia, and the Tennessee

churches would be constituted as a new presbytery with some other name. ("Westminster-Lite" was the proposal I liked best.) Congregations and teaching elders from either state could join the presbytery they liked best—making the division theological and not truly geographical. Consequently, the 2000 General Assembly denied the request. In 2001, the Conflict Resolution Committee discussed having a truly geographical division. (But since churches in counties contiguous to another presbytery could join that presbytery, it still had the effect of being a theological division.) The Committee didn't pass the division proposal, but it was scheduled to come before the April stated meeting of presbytery in the form of another minority report. And that is where the fun started.

Sometimes things happen with no apparent rhyme or reason. On the way to the presbytery meeting in April, 2001, members of our session were discussing the division scheme, which we didn't like. "You know," Joe Reynolds said, "I have half a mind to suggest that Westminster Presbytery just withdraw from the PCA." I didn't think anything more of the comment until midway through the division debate, when Joe made his motion. What was surprising was the groundswell of support for the motion, from a weird coalition of both TRs and BRs. It was the first time in two years that they had something to agree on! The motion was eventually tabled, pending the report of a special committee to investigate details of the departure, and I thought that that would be the end of it. But the issue came up the next month, in May of 2001, at a special called meeting. The coalition held fast, and by a surprisingly large vote (48-13) Westminster Presbytery voted to withdraw from the PCA. The secession "package deal" provided for the departure of the presbytery in January, 2002; stated that any congregation or teaching elder taking action to leave the PCA would remain in the continuing Westminster Presbytery; and said that those taking no action would remain in the PCA, in a new presbytery which the General Assembly would hopefully erect. Westminster Presbytery thus overtured the 2001 General Assembly to erect a new presbytery in the territory that Westminster would vacate the following January. Westminster had yet another called meeting, in June, 2001, to hear a complaint against the action of presbytery's secession. Presbytery decided to wait to act on the complaint, until after the General Assembly. (In July, 2001, presbytery denied the complaint.)

Church politics make for strange bedfellows, and it is a strange coalition that supports secession from the PCA. On the one hand are TRs who are fed up with the direction of the denomination and are eager to leave. Most of these TRs would prefer to be in Joe Morecraft's denomination, while some lean toward the OPC or non-aligned status. The other half of the coalition is made up of broad evangelicals who support Westminster's secession, but reportedly have no intention of staying in the

presbytery and plan to transfer back to the PCA. Just what are these BRs up to? Some see their unusual support of secession as an easy way of getting rid of the TRs. Others believe that secession is a clever BR tactic to get rid of historic Westminster Presbytery with its embarrassing strict subscriptionist requirements. A new presbytery created by the General Assembly wouldn't require Old School theological standards. In any event, it was curious to watch what happened. Formerly feuding factions worked harmoniously together and appeared "as thick as thieves." Those opposing withdrawal were left in the dust. "I am theonomic, postmillennial, presuppositionalist, paedocommunionist, and reconstructionist," said one anti-secessionist pastor during the General Assembly debate, "and believe it or not I am considered a moderate –in Westminster Presbytery!" The 2001 General Assembly gave the Westminster saga a new wrinkle. Instead of accepting the Westminster "package deal," the Assembly made its own recommendation. It affirmed that Westminster had the right to leave the PCA at any time. But if the presbytery did leave, it would automatically take all its churches and Teaching Elders out of the denomination. (Churches and Teaching Elders subsequently could request to be received back into the PCA.) The General Assembly also urged the presbytery to reconsider its action. Finally, the Assembly called into question the integrity of those voting to leave. BRs, the report concluded, were not serious about leaving and were simply pursuing political expediency. TRs, who should have left the PCA individually and congregationally rather than disturb the peace of the presbytery, had made a Faustian deal with those they knew weren't serious about the leaving.

The integrity charges especially rankled those in Westminster Presbytery. (Since I opposed presbytery's withdrawal, I enjoyed watching my secessionist friends squirm under the charges). My friends insisted that the coalition acted out of integrity. Westminster was founded as a strictly confessional presbytery, the argument goes, and both TRs and BRs agree on that. The PCA no longer holds Old School confessional standards, the argument continues, and both TRs and BRs seem to concede that. TRs feel conscience-bound to uphold the theological standards of the presbytery. BRs are annoyed that Westminster is "out of step" with the denomination and feel duty-bound to bring the presbytery into conformity with the broader mainstream. The secession action allows both groups to cooperate, to satisfy their consciences about their duty to the church, and to claim the high road of integrity.

As it stands now, Westminster Presbytery is scheduled to leave the PCA in January. A motion to rescind the secessionist vote is scheduled for the October meeting, but so far the coalition has held firm. There seems to be some interest in delaying the withdrawal until next June, to coincide with the 2002 General Assembly. (That would allow Teaching Elders who want

to stay in the PCA to keep their insurance coverage, and would allow the Assembly immediately to create a new presbytery.)

Women Preachers and Covenant Seminary

Another hot issue at the Assembly was women preachers. The issue has troubled the church over the last two years and raises serious questions about the role of women, the definition of preaching, and the extent of cultural compromise in the PCA.

The issue first surfaced at Cedar Springs PCA in Knoxville, in August of 1998, when a woman on the church staff preached at some evening worship services. The church's pastor gave mixed signals about the event, but appeared to believe that women could preach in a "non-authoritative" fashion. The argument goes this way: only ordained men can officially and authoritatively preach; women cannot be ordained in the PCA; therefore by definition women cannot "preach." Women may read, exposit, and apply the Word in services, this line of thinking continues, but it just isn't official preaching.

In 2000 the General Assembly directed the Standing Judicial Commission (SJC) to investigate the matter. The SJC report, received at the Assembly this year, noted that the events at Cedar Spring "crossed the line," but declined to proceed further against the pastor. (A concurring opinion, issued by some members of the SJC, further exacerbated tensions by alleging that the 2000 General Assembly erred by attacking those who had raised concerns about the issue of women preaching.) In the meantime, the Cedar Springs congregation voted to withdraw from the PCA and join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, a denomination that allows the ordination of women.

The issue was kept alive at the 2001 General Assembly by overtures from presbyteries concerned about women preaching and the poor handling of the matter by the SJC. The strongest overture came from Philadelphia Presbytery, which proposed an amendment to the PCA's Book of Church Order. The Assembly eventually passed a BCO amendment which, with reference to I Timothy 2:11-12, would guarantee that only "men as are sufficiently qualified" would be allowed to preach. The message of the Assembly seemed clear: only men should be permitted to preach.

Special fireworks were reserved for Covenant Theological Seminary (CTS). In March of 2001 a woman spoke at a CTS chapel service. (This much everyone agrees on; what they disagree about is whether she was speaking, preaching, or, I guess, preaching "non-authoritatively.") Those investigating the incident had difficulty receiving information and chapel tapes. (Again, everyone agrees on this much; the disagreement is about whether or not CTS was trying to engineer a cover up.) *Presbyterian and Reformed News* (March-April, 2001) eventually ran an article with the bold

headline, “Covenant Seminary Shrouds Itself in Mystery.” Many commissioners went to the Assembly wondering about what was happening at Covenant.

I was on the General Assembly Committee of Commissioners for Covenant Theological Seminary. It was clear from the start the Seminary president, Bryan Chapell, was “loaded for bear.” Our meeting room was packed with CTS people—faculty, alumni, and administrators. (A former General Assembly moderator asked me what committee meeting had that “cast of thousands.”) Chapell proposed that the Committee suspend its normal rules (according to Rules of Assembly Operation the Committees of Commissioners may only deal with assigned business) and hear his response to the *P&R News* story. The Committee declined to do this, but it did allow Chapell to raise general concerns, which he also did on the floor of the General Assembly.

Chapell was angry about the *P&R News* story and claimed that it was unfair. He conceded that he felt uncomfortable with the style of the woman’s address at the CTS chapel service, knew that it would create problems, and took steps to make sure further speeches wouldn’t cross the line. Under questioning, he admitted that her address had “sermonic elements.” But Chapell absolutely denied that there was a cover-up. It was the policy of the CTS Board not to release information to *P&R News*. Tapes weren’t mailed out as promised, only because CTS hadn’t received a legal release from the speaker. (The speaker insists that she had faxed the legal release, but Chapell’s claim is that the fax in question got lost.)

Chapell really caught our attention with a clever show-and-tell illustration. He produced a big pile of books, written by Covenant professors, which argued against the ordination of women. Then he laid a single copy of *P&R News* on the table and asked, “which stack is bigger?” (I had my own idea for a cute illustration. I would have liked someone to produce a stack of books by CTS professors in favor of the day-age theory, the framework hypothesis, or whatever other trendy theories are being promoted about Genesis 1. Then I wanted my speaker to pull out copies of the Bible and the Westminster Confession of Faith and to ask, “which stack is taller?”) Furthermore, I thought that Chapell’s illustration was a clever bait-and-switch maneuver. *P&R News* never claimed that CTS was advocating women’s ordination, only that a woman may have preached at a CTS chapel service. At CTS, apparently, if you formally oppose women’s ordination, then you can never be guilty of allowing a woman to preach. It’s the same definitional double-speak used at Cedar Springs. In the end, the General Assembly voted to affirm CTS and to label the *P&R News* story “unfortunate and unfair.”

The controversy revolved around two basic questions. First, did a

woman preach at a CTS chapel in March? I met a commissioner at our committee meeting who said that he’d heard a tape of the sermon. “Did it quack?,” I asked, thinking of things that look, walk, and quack like ducks. “It’s a duck,” he replied, “there is even a benediction at the end.”

I picked up a copy of the tape at the General Assembly and decided to give it the “Wally test” when I got home. Walter Machen Schultz is my seven-year old son. He is oblivious to General Assembly issues, and I knew that he would give an impartial and completely objective response. “Wally,” I said, “listen to this tape and tell me if the nice lady is preaching.” “She’s preaching,” he affirmed. But then, realizing that women shouldn’t preach and no doubt expecting a trick, he asked, “Or is it teaching?” I can visualize the same confusion on the CTS faculty. Was that woman preaching or teaching? Chapell, a homiletics expert, would only say that there were “sermonic elements.”

Second, was there a cover-up at CTS? President Chapell did give an accounting of events to the Assembly, though I don’t know if that would have occurred without the *P&R News* story. I still have some questions about the length of time it took to release the tapes, the early release of tapes “in house,” and the “missing fax.” The *P&R News* story seemed accurate, though it was deeply suspicious of CTS. CTS certainly wasn’t helpful in releasing information for the *P&R News* story. The seminary isn’t required to give information to the press, I suppose, but it shouldn’t be surprised if negative stories follow its refusal to cooperate. In the end, I don’t know if there was a cover-up or not.

I have concerns about the whole women preaching issue, and the issue of women’s ordination was the reason I left the UPCUSA. Some in the PCA have resorted to coy explanations and disingenuous definitions. Women may read, exposit, and apply scripture—but it isn’t really preaching because women can’t be ordained. Women may speak in chapel—but those chapels really aren’t worship chapels. Women may teach men—but its not authoritative. I’d like to hear denominational leaders say: “Women may not preach. Scripture forbids it. Our constitutional standards do not allow it. When it happens it’s wrong. We won’t let it happen again. And we are thankful that brothers hold us accountable.” Instead, they prefer to circle the wagons and shoot the messengers.

The PCA was organized in 1973 as a conservative church, opposed to the cultural and theological liberalism in the PCUS. So far the church steadfastly limits ordination and the office of preaching to men, but some are proposing new definitions of preaching and advocating an expanded role for women.

The particular dispute about CTS is important for other reasons as well. In churches that are growing weak theologically, the most important orthodoxy is institutional loyalty, and the greatest heresy is criticism of the

denominational hierarchy. When institutional loyalty is more important than Biblical and theological fidelity, a church is in trouble. The indignant reaction of denominational leaders to any criticism of CTS may well be a sign of trouble.

In some ways, Smith and Chapell represent vastly different visions for the church. Both men are the same age. Both are well educated, Smith exceptionally so. Smith is the denomination's expert on PCA history, theology and polity and is an excellent journalist. Chapell is a popular speaker and a gifted and persuasive communicator. But here the similarities end. Smith, a staunch advocate of Old School southern Presbyterianism, is the pastor of a small church in a coal-mining town in the mountains of Southwest Virginia. Chapell, well connected in the denomination and the head of a large suburban seminary just off the St. Louis beltway, wants a broader and more inclusive church. Time will tell which vision triumphs in the PCA.

Genesis 1 and the Days of Creation

The issue of creation, which has haunted the denomination over the last few years, arose again this year. In 2000, the General Assembly determined that a diversity of views on the days of creation was acceptable. The issue touches on theology and Biblical hermeneutics, as well as upon confessional subscription. In addition to the clear teaching of Genesis 1, the Westminster Confession of Faith states that God created the world in "the space of six days." This year, presbyteries sent up a variety of overtures on creation. Some would have required the presbyteries to accept a diversity of views. Others would have required presbyteries to note "exceptions" to the confessional standards when ministers and licentiates hold bizarre views of Genesis 1.

The Bills and Overtures Committee of Commissioners recommended that the General Assembly vote against these creation overtures, contending that the church's position was clear. An excellent minority report from the committee, however, urged a different course. While presbyteries have the final say on the admission of men and the evaluation of their views, the presbyteries were required to record exceptions to the church's doctrinal standards. Theological integrity would require this.

In the end, the Assembly voted against the minority report, thus voting to continue the new status quo. It is bad enough for the church to allow weak theology. But even when that happens, the church has an obligation to require basic honesty in dealing with its confessional standards. All of this was discouraging, but the battle was already lost last year. For those interested in the subject, the best Biblical, theological and confessional overview is by David Hall and is available on-line (<http://capo.org/holdfast1.html>).

The creation issue drew the attention in the national media. My in-laws loved it. I sometimes make snide comments about the theological wimpiness of their home church. Now they could counter, "We see that the PCA is compromising on creation." Even worse was the reaction of my father, who is suspicious of Presbyterians but can't keep the denominations straight. He wanted to know if I was in that church that ordains homosexuals and doesn't believe in creation. Of course, if you no longer believe the Bible, either position is acceptable. The difference between the two, as my in-laws would be happy to explain, is one of degree, not substance.

The Standing Judicial Commission

For many in the church, the Standing Judicial Commission (SJC) is the prime example of what is wrong with the denomination. The SJC hears all judicial cases for the Assembly and reports on what it has done. The power of the SJC has grown over the years, at the same time that its accountability has diminished. The denomination has no right to overturn or protest the decisions of the SJC. As the 2001 General Assembly demonstrates, the SJC is becoming an entity unto itself.

The John Wood "matter" is a good case in point. In 1999, after the woman preaching episode at Cedar Springs and the failure of Tennessee Valley Presbytery to act, presbyteries overtured the General Assembly to take original jurisdiction in the case. The 1999 GA referred the matter to the SJC, which refused to act, saying that the case was out of order. In 2000, the Assembly insisted that the SJC carry out its investigation, and it was this SJC report that came to the 2001 Assembly.

The SJC report on the John Wood matter was sloppy. The SJC admitted that the events at Cedar Springs had "crossed the line." But, the SJC continued, the investigation hadn't resulted in a "strong presumption of guilt" against Wood. There was no proof that Wood was trying to encourage women preaching; Wood hadn't promoted the ordination of women; there was no clear evidence that his views were "outside the bounds of our Standards." I was puzzled by the inconsistent testimony. Morton Smith and Joey Pipa, for instance, testified that Wood said he believed that women could preach. Wood admitted this, but said he meant preach in a "broad" sense, not in the authoritative way that Teaching Elders preach. I spoke with many at the Assembly who were furious about the poor quality of the SJC investigation and believed the SJC was trying to sweep the issue under the rug to protect one of the "big steeple boys."

What made the matter worse was a Concurring Opinion signed by a number of SJC members. The Opinion scolds the 2000 General Assembly for giving in to "high emotion" and assigning the case to the SJC, saying

that “commissioners ignored [SJC] advice” and “rushed to a decision.” The Opinion further blames the problem on Smith and Pipa (for not more thoroughly investigating Wood’s views), the friends of Greenville Seminary (for launching a movement to discipline Wood), and *Presbyterian and Reformed News* (which “fanned the flames with misinformation”). Finally, the Opinion admonishes the Assembly “to be careful not to permit an emotional issue to lead us to unconstitutional action in the future.” This is a stunning document. In theory, the SJC is a commission assigned with doing work for the Assembly. But here, SJC members defame ministers of the church and rebuke the General Assembly.

What checks and balances are in place to prevent such intemperate outbursts? Is there a way to stop the SJC from becoming a rogue entity? Theoretically, the Committee on Constitutional Business (CCB) is supposed to review the minutes of the SJC, but apparently that didn’t happen. I don’t have access to the facts, but I have a friend on the CCB who was absolutely livid about the SJC’s conduct.

There was special concern on the floor of the Assembly about the SJC report and the language of the Concurring Opinion. Since the Assembly is not allowed to even discuss the SJC report, commissioners tried to raise the issue through the backdoor, which always failed. Finally, Jack Williamson, the author of the Concurring Opinion, offered a cheesy apology. He said that if anyone was offended by his Opinion, he apologized, and he offered to withdraw the crack about *P&R News* and the flames of misinformation. (Try giving your wife such a vague and gratuitous apology sometime, and see how far you get. After belittling her, try saying, “Honey, if I ever done anything to offend you, I apologize.” For an apology to be legitimate it should be specific and sincere, and it should seek reconciliation. My wife prefers me to say something like: “I did this. It is wrong. I am sorry. Will you forgive me?”) Commissioners then wondered if Williamson was withdrawing all intemperate remarks from the Opinion, or just the one about *P&R News*. Was he apologizing for the whole Opinion, or just a portion? Did he also feel bad about what he said about Morton Smith and Joey Pipa? Did he intend to have the Opinion expunged from the Minutes? Finally, a flustered Williamson rose to say that he was withdrawing his apology and leaving the Opinion as it was. (I know that my wife wouldn’t be impressed by that!)

In the end, we were left with another SJC debacle. Most of us have grown accustomed to poor decisions from the Commission. But the rebuke of the General Assembly is something new, as are the outrageous remarks. The lack of accountability is clearly a problem. No one knows what the SJC might do in the future. And the SJC is scheduled to hear the complaint about Westminster Presbytery’s secession in the fall of 2001.

(There was another Concurring Opinion on the Wood matter, written

by a Ruling Elder named Robert Miller. I don’t know Mr. Miller, don’t know all of the facts of the investigation, and don’t know if his conclusions are correct. But I greatly appreciated the temperate tone and thoughtful observations of his opinion. If other SJC documents were as carefully and faithfully prepared, most of us wouldn’t be complaining about the SJC.)

Westminster Standards and Confessional Subscription

A fundamental question in all these disputes is about the church’s theological commitments, specifically its relationship to the *Westminster Standards*. Each elder in the PCA takes an ordination vow “to receive and adopt” the *Westminster Standards*, as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture. It is the further obligation of ministers to notify Presbytery whenever they are out of accord with any of the fundamentals of the system of doctrine. Of critical concern in the subscription debate are the definitions of “receiving and adopting” and the meaning of the “fundamentals of the system of doctrine.”

The General Assembly opened with an afternoon full of presentations on subscription, which I thought was good. Representatives of the various positions gave their view of things, and I found each presenter thought-provoking and challenging. Joey Pipa of Greenville Seminary, for instance, represented the full subscriptionist position. He made a strong statement about regulative worship, arguing that church services shouldn’t have “dancing, drama, and ditties!” Yet he argued that “an allowable scruple might be taken with respect to the length of days [in Genesis 1].” “Find out if Greenville is going all squishy,” I told my roommate, who is a Greenville alumnus. Apparently even the strict confessionalists are men of considerable latitude nowadays.

Most interesting was the presentation by Bryan Chapell, the president of Covenant Seminary. Chapell threw down the gauntlet, contending that strict subscriptionism was Pharisaical, tended to “enscripturate” the confession, and smacked more of Rome than the Reformation. This is heavy-duty rhetoric, especially from a denominational servant. Chapell explored the intent of the founders of the PCA, which was helpful. He claimed that the founding fathers of the PCA never intended to create a strict subscriptionist church (though Westminster Presbytery explicitly and emphatically did just that). Chapell further noted that the PCA has always had a degree of latitude in some areas of doctrine and practice (for instance, with millennial views or the use of hymns and musical instruments).

Chapell also distributed a booklet, *Perspectives on the Subscription Standards of the Presbyterian Church in America*, which covered the same ground as his presentation. The booklet includes a section on the errors of the *Westminster Standards*: Chapell suggests, to use one example that

caught my attention, that it is improper to use Isaiah 58 to support Sabbath-keeping. What really caught my attention was his argument that “good-faith subscription” would “guard against apostasy and promote the Kingdom of Christ”(p.36). Here he appears to agree with strict-subscriptionist TRs, who have long argued that the subscription debate is one about integrity. Men should come forward and fully explain their beliefs, the TRs argue, and allow the presbytery to determine if their views are acceptable. The problem is, TRs continue, that men lack integrity and don’t come clean about their beliefs and their exceptions to the *Standards*. Concerning the lack of integrity among broad evangelicals, it was surprising to find Chapell agreeing with the TRs! He admits that tight standards and fears of theological strictness encourage the broader brothers to be deceitful. As Chapell puts it, “No human system or standard will guarantee orthodoxy, but a system of examination that allows for good faith expression of difference under strict biblical constraint keeps men from the temptation to affirm what they do not truly believe, or to put private construction upon words they publicly vow. Apostasy is hastened by a rigidity that penalizes men for honestly stating their reservations about reasonable differences regarding our system of doctrine” (p.36).

But why stop half-way? If loose theological standards encourage integrity and honesty and guarantee conformity with the (now lowered) standards, it follows that the best way to secure even greater honesty and conformity is to lower the standards further. For full honesty, candor, and integrity, the church might drop the standards completely. Perhaps A. A. Hodge’s comment about government schools is applicable to presbyterian subscription debate: “he that believes most must give way to him that believes least, and he that believes least must give way to him that believes absolutely nothing . . .” (*Evangelical Theology*, 242).

Of course, every church will hold to something. Confessional standards may be clearly stated and published, or they may be assumed and hidden. But standards will by necessity exist. I read Chapell’s subscription booklet with that in mind, to see what he really believes. Chapell affirms the need “to embrace the Reformed Faith as expressed in our confessional standards,” but goes on to say that, “at the same time, we must recognize that this commitment is not a sufficient bond for our unity as a church” (p. 37). Our confession of faith isn’t a sufficient bond of unity? That is an astonishing statement for the president of the church’s seminary to make.

But what does the CTS president think will unite us? Chapell writes: “What kind of vision has the greatest potential for insuring and promoting orthodoxy among us? A renewed and Reformed appreciation for persons, ministers, and congregations of differing gifts, personalities, and kinds of concerns should help us to lock arm-in-arm in greater strength and love to worship our sovereign God and to tell the world of his mercy in Christ.”

What exactly does this mean? First, one has to wade through all of the fuzzy cliches about goose-stepping into the future. Second, there are general Christian commitments about the sovereignty of God and salvation through Christ, which we are pleased to see. Finally and most importantly, there is the overarching language of diversity. People in the pews may find this novel and fresh. Those of us in the world of academia, however, are weary of this politically-correct diversity mantra. “Diversity is good,” the world chants, “celebrate diversity!” I’d prefer that the church confessed, “Faithfulness is good!”

Chapell’s booklet and subscription speech made his presentation before the CTS Committee of Commissioners even more intriguing. He spoke of recruiting minority faculty and students, for instance, hoping to encourage diversity and a broader outreach. One commissioner, noting this zeal for diversity, inquired about the lack of an Old School, strict subscriptionist presence at CTS. “When I look at the Covenant Seminary faculty,” he noted, “I don’t see any Old School Southern Presbyterians looking back at me.” CTS was there to serve the mainstream of the church, Chapell responded, it couldn’t cater to the “outer fringes.” “How do you like being consigned to the fringes?” the commissioner asked me later. Indeed, it is a sad day when elders are considered to be on the periphery of the denomination just because they take seriously the church’s confessional standards and their ordination vows.

Perhaps the PCA is following the subscription path of other Presbyterian denominations. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church, for instance, sent a visiting minister to our General Assembly who reminded us of their motto: “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” The EPC, in addition to endorsing the *Westminster Standards*, has identified seven non-negotiable “essential” doctrines (authority of Word, deity of Christ, etc.). Touchy issues, such as women’s ordination, are left to presbyteries and sessions (an approach the PCA is probably moving toward). At least the EPC defines its “essentials.” The PCA has never defined what is meant by the clause “the fundamentals of this system of doctrine.” Of course, at some point, someone will have reservations or exceptions to some detail of the EPC Essentials, and the argument will be made that this little detail doesn’t undermine the theological system of the Essentials. The EPC has not solved, only delayed, its struggle over subscription. The liberal PCUSA still makes a pretense of having theological standards, which ministers “receive” and are “instructed by,” although everyone knows that this means nothing. The only thing the PCUSA stands for is the absolute requirement of embracing women’s ordination and submitting to the denominational machinery.

Every church will hold some standard. It may be an explicit and published theological standard, an implicit and customary code of conduct

and simple faith, or allegiance to institutional unity and ecclesiastical hierarchy. I hope that the PCA will choose to remain true to the Word of God, and to her subordinate confessional standards. After all, every elder has already taken a solemn ordination vow to “receive and adopt” those standards.

Women in Combat

The PCA General Assembly heard yet another report from the Study Committee on Women in Combat. Many have been concerned about the prospect of women serving in combat roles, about moral problems in the U.S. military, and about the awkward position in which PCA chaplains have been placed. Presbytery overtures about women in combat started coming to the General Assembly in 1996, and the Assembly eventually erected a special Ad Interim Study Committee. The Committee brought reports in 1999, 2000, and 2001, but has had difficulty in completing its work. There is a consensus on the committee that serving in the military is honorable, that the military has serious moral problems, and that our chaplains should be encouraged.

There are also sharp differences on the committee. I found the committee presentation confusing, and was never quite sure about what they had concluded, what they agreed on, and what they didn't. In many ways, the committee's conflict represents a major conflict with PCA. It is a conflict over scriptural interpretation, the role of the Old Testament law, and the sufficiency of scripture. Half the committee is labeled theonomic, the other half is maligned as antinomian.

Those labeled theonomic supported what is called the Duty View. The church and individual Christians have a duty to respond to the commands of God. Pointing to a number of passages concerning OT Israel, the Duty guys conclude that God has given the role of fighting and military service to men. But “theonomy” and “antinomianism” are in the background. As the Duty Paper argues, “The Old Testament laws of war must not be relegated to the ash heap of ‘abrogation’ under the pious guise of forswearing theonomic visions of the restorations of a theocracy today. Really, those who oppose the Old Testament laws concerning the ‘relation of the sexes,’ claiming to be guarding freedom of conscience in matters indifferent, are repeating the errors of Anabaptists and Antinomians, and ought to be condemned as firmly as our Reformed fathers condemned this error in past centuries.”

The Conscience or Wise Counsel View insists that the Bible doesn't directly deal with the issue of women in combat. Where the Bible is silent, we must be silent. The church may give wise counsel to women who wish to join the Marines, for example, but couldn't prohibit them from enlisting. That decision must be left to the individual's conscience. Old Testament

law shouldn't be used today, and we must be careful to avoid “Old Testament theocratic civil law.” As the Conscience View states, “We would counsel great care in the use of the Old Testament civil law of Israel as a means of extracting a specific command that would be required of the Christian woman in a modern secular state. We would remind our church that our *Standards* make provision only for a general equity.”

I was interested in the Conscience View interpretation of Deuteronomy 22:5, the verse which says that women may not wear the habit of the strong man (or warrior). It is an Old Testament civil law, of course, so it doesn't quite count. The Conscience View states that the verse really condemns transvestitism, and not women in military service. (Of course, if an Old Testament law doesn't count, you cannot use it to condemn transvestitism, either.) A TR friend was having a discussion with a big-name BR at the Assembly. Because of the silence of scripture on the subject, the BR said, the church could only counsel women against joining the military. But if the Bible is truly silent on an issue, my friend argued, you cannot really give Biblical “wise counsel.” After a moment of reflection, the BR conceded the point, saying, “I guess we only appeal to theonomic principles when we need them.”

The Assembly did adopt the least controversial recommendations of the Study Committee. I wasn't particularly happy with either the Duty or the Conscience documents, though I do think that the church needs to take a stand. I suspect that most commissioners are tired of the issue, and we are supposed to hear the final report next year at the Assembly. In the meantime, the discussion points to fundamental theological, cultural and hermeneutical differences within the church.

I always ask for reactions from commissioners on how they thought the General Assembly went. One friend from Westminster Presbytery, who is perennially discouraged about the Assembly and pessimistic about the future of the denomination, left Dallas this year upbeat and positive. Why the general cheeriness? He explained that he was off the floor doing committee work so that he missed most of the Assembly debate that would have irritated him. And since he was from Westminster Presbytery, it meant that this might be the last PCA General Assembly he'd ever have to attend.

The PCA has its troubles, but it still has a good evangelical witness. The church was organized in 1973 with a commitment to the Word of God, the Reformed faith, and the Great Commission of Christ. I think that the PCA retains its commitment to the inerrant Word, the gospel of Christ and the work of evangelism and missions. But I would like to see the PCA theologically stronger, more consistently Reformed and true to its confessional standards. It is, after all, what we vow to be.

The Practice of Confessional Subscription

An Interview with David W. Hall

by Byron Snapp

David Hall pastors Covenant Presbyterian Church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He is the author or editor of many books including *The Arrogance of the Modern* and *The Millennium of Jesus Christ*

Q: What is meant by the term *subscription*?

First, I'd like to make a definitional note about terminology. *Subscription* itself does not occur in the Westminster standards. So, we should understand that this is an added construct. I happen to think, however, that it is a *helpful* construct, rather than a dangerous one.

One of the reasons it is helpful is because the term *subscription* as it was originally used had a definite meaning. It is derived from the Latin term meaning to "write under" or to sign one's name at the bottom of a document, indicating one's agreement to the terms of the document. Regarding *subscription* to a confession, then, the term simply means that one agrees to its content. It functions much like an "amen" to a prayer or a hymn, validating one's agreement to the sentiments contained.

Some people, however, dislike the term because it implies that they must agree to certain fixed ideas in a confession. Many moderns and postmoderns are much more inclined toward an eclectic view, wishing to pick and choose what they believe. In an extremely individual-centered culture like ours, a majority of people detest traditional truth and would rather formulate their own personal creeds. Thus, any kind of subscription cramps that style, and many folks (even in Reformed communions) would rather practice *superscription* (lit., to write above) than *subscription*.

In other words, many prefer to strike out certain clauses of a particular confession like one would strike out an individual clause in a contract. Rather than adopting the whole, some folks wish to cherry-pick their doctrines, which is more akin to superscription than to subscription.

Interestingly, another contemporary use of *subscription* pertains to a contract to purchase a magazine or a newspaper on a regular basis. Few of us are permitted to buy only one issue of *Sports Illustrated* per year or only *subscribe eclectically* during football season. One has to subscribe either for a full year or not at all. Most publishing companies do not permit "loose subscription" or subscribing only to the portions we are predisposed to enjoy. Few people have a crisis of conscience over that; nor do many view that as a malignant limitation on their freedom of conscience.

Moreover, in early American Presbyterianism, the term *subscription* was also frequently used (and still is today) to mean to publicly affix one's signature and reputation to a document to provide authenticity, as in a legal deposition or protestation. Neither is the notion of subscription

ecclesiastical only.

When I enrolled my daughter at a state university in the South recently, they even had the gall to publish a creed, complete with several politically-correct notions to which the school "subscribed." I found it intriguing that a modern, secular school would allude unashamedly to subscription without fear of trampling on freedom of conscience. Moreover, recent gains in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) have taken them to a position that sometimes puts modern Presbyterians to shame. The SBC, at least, states that it has creedal expectations on the role of women, on the nature of scripture, and other pressing issues. I applaud their candor.

So the term seems to retain its utility in several quarters. For me, however, whether issues are framed in terms of "loose," "system," "honest," or "full" subscription, the crucial point is this: do we agree with the historic formulations of biblical truth or not? It is, for me, much more an issue of adherence to biblical truth than whether one toes a certain partisan line. If our confession is not biblical, then it seems that we should change it. Whether a candidate subscribes to our confession or takes exception to minor points is a beginning (not the ending) diagnostic tool for presbyters to ascertain if sufficient biblical study and adequate conclusions have been reached.

Q: What is the theme of *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*?

The theme of *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, originally published in 1995 by the University Press of America and recently reprinted by the Covenant Foundation, was that Reformed churches were healthiest when they adhered to clear notions of truth. I proposed that the contributors from various denominations and with different specialties debate the following resolution: *The Church is healthiest which knows what it believes, has such beliefs codified in a confession for all to know, and formally has a consistent, public mechanism for perpetuating such orthodoxy.* The churches growing out of the Reformation relied—in part—on confessional subscription to accomplish the final part of that resolution, and before jettisoning such, that tradition should be thoroughly examined and repudiated before rejecting it. Thus, the burden of proof, in light of the history of this question, is on those who wish to dismiss confessional subscription and substitute some other method to ensure and support continued orthodoxy.

We thought this resolution was a fair way to discuss an important question, and a vigorous but good-spirited debate ensued. Before we published this volume we thought that what was missing from the literature was a well-informed discussion from participants who exhibited a diversity

of viewpoints, while also holding to the confession. This volume does not reach definitive conclusions to be sure, but raises the questions and seeks to assemble informed voices on the subject. The anthology deliberately represented a range of views with some diversity. However, the diversity among the 14 contributors was healthy and did not strain the borders of orthodoxy.

We also included three of the major historical figures from the American debate—Charles Hodge, Robert Dabney, and John Murray—for additional historic reference. Our goal was to assemble the best discussions on this topic and make those available for study. Rather than seeking to advocate a normative position, we simply collected materials that provided a descriptive approach. One of the besetting problems in this particular nexus is, indeed, that many people cannot access the best descriptive studies on this issue because it has often been so emotional or political. And, as we see in several other areas, what our forefathers clearly held can become distorted when moderns seek to twist noses of wax to conform to more recent practices. We thought it would help, before conclusions were drawn, first to assemble materials to show the history of the question. Accordingly, we have excellent studies on the history of this issue from Scottish (admittedly our most direct descendant), Continental, Dutch, Irish, and American Presbyterian traditions.

There was a definite pre-history, stemming at least from the Reformation. Reformation creeds themselves were frequently subscribed, even if that technical term was not used. For example, in Calvin's Geneva, Calvin himself advocated the formal adoption of a Catechism (1536) by all citizens. The Ministers of the Presbytery (Company of Pastors) frequently signed documents indicating both their authenticity, as well as their affirmation. Numerous other Reformation creeds and confessions were signed. Later, the *First Scots Confession*—and subsequently, even polity documents—were subscribed. Beza and others subscribed the *French Confession of Faith* at the Synod of Emden in 1571. The Lutheran tradition of subscription at the Reformation was clear when it is remembered that certain leading Lutheran leaders were not allowed to subscribe the *Augsburg Confession* (1530) because they demurred at one particular article concerning the uniquely Lutheran view of the sacrament. James R. Payton, Jr. observes, "Their request to subscribe with a proviso was denied: subscription had to be to the confession *in toto* or not at all. The rigor with which this defense of an unqualified confessional subscription was maintained in the midst of exceptionally dangerous circumstances speaks volumes regarding the attitude of the early Protestants toward a confession."

The Lutherans subscribed the 1537 *Smalcald Articles*. The *First Helvetic Confession* was formerly read before each congregation annually, and ministers in that communion are still required to promise, "to teach according to the direction of God's Word and the *Basle Confession* derived therefrom." So popular was subscription that by 1573, graduates of Oxford were required to subscribe prior to receiving degrees, while by 1576 subscription was applied even to entrants over the age of sixteen. It is well known that Scottish Christians subscribed national covenants in 1581, in 1638, and took part in subscribing the *Solemn League and Covenant* with the Westminster Divines ("Wherein we all subscribe, and each one of us for himself with our hands lifted up to the most high God, do swear") in 1643.

Thus, even from these few references, it is clear that the first generation of the Reformation churches—committed to biblical truth—had no qualms about composing, embracing, requiring, and subscribing to biblical re-statements of the faith. So accepted was this, that there was very little debate within Protestants over the propriety of creedal subscription, except among the Anabaptists and other fringe groups of the Reformation. (Source: *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*)

Q. Does this volume promote either a loose or strict subscriptionist position?

In view of this range of diversity, the volume tried to exhibit the helpful materials from the past. I am quite content to permit others to draw the conclusions they wish and for governing bodies of the church to formulate policy as they should. We have no interest in dictating policy to other bodies; we simply continue to rummage around in old texts and enjoy the historical discoveries from the past. And occasionally we find that, for some reason, when these old texts are published, some people who do not practice those older approaches become a little nervous and tend to accuse us of trying to take the church back a step—as if moving back to our pre-modern orthodoxies might not be a little better than recent trajectories (but that's another issue altogether). The very title, I'm afraid, scares some folks who fear that some nefarious agenda is promoted within. That is not the case; this is a historical book. No one should panic or accuse over the mere publishing of information and study by these representative scholars and churchmen.

The only view I advocate in this book (although other authors were free to advocate whatever view they wished) may be summarized like this:

Let's be fair to our forefathers and not remold them into latitudinarians or Pharisees if they were not. Modern communions may wish to be more latitudinarian, but that might also be a departure from our spiritual parents. If so, we should at least give them a voice at the table and reject their counsel only for superior formulations.

Q: Why has the issue of subscription been a problem in the history of Presbyterianism?

Most likely there is a good reason for confusion on this issue throughout our American history; and it may be within American Presbyterianism that there is more confusion on this than elsewhere. The problematic nature of this is probably as simple as this: there was an initial ambiguity in one official recording. The 1729 act had a preliminary minute, which referred to “essential and necessary articles;” there was also a second act that same afternoon, the formal adopting act, which adopted the *Westminster Confession* in its entirety, excepting only certain clauses in the 20th and 23rd chapters on church-state relationships. Obviously, these Americans could not subscribe to the quasi-Erastian view of the original *Westminster Confession of Faith*, so they honestly stated their differences and slightly altered the confession. However, neither did this maiden instance of American subscription countenance a subjectively construed adoption nor did it allow unlimited scrupling.

Some early American Presbyterians, who desired to avoid anything resembling the abuses in England from the previous century, were confused by later interpretations of the initial act. That necessitated that the same Synod, the very next year, attempted to clarify its own motive. In 1730, the Synod amplified its intent not to weaken the manner of subscribing but declared to the watching world that candidates were to “receive and adopt the Confession and Catechisms at their Admission in the same Manner and as fully as the Members of the Synod did that were then [1729] present.” This was unanimously approved by the members of Synod.

If that were not clear enough, a few years later in 1736, the Synod again unanimously amplified its intent on the manner of adoption:

That in order to remove said offence [i. e., that the “preliminary act” was definitive] . . . the Synod doth declare that the Synod have adopted and still do adhere to the *Westminster Confession Catechisms* and *Directory* without the least variation or alteration . . . And we do further declare that this was our meaning and true Intent in our first adopting of s[ai]d Confession [then follows a reprinting of the Adopting Act, not the preliminary framework] . . . And we hope and desire that this our Synodical Declaration and

Explication may satisfy all our People as to our firm attachment to our good old received Doctrines contained in s[ai]d Confession without the least variation and alteration . . . approved *Nem. Contradicente* (without contradiction).

A clearer case of original intent could hardly be imagined.

However, rather than allowing those original participants to clarify their own thoughts without prejudice, some modern ideologues try to seize on one action or the other (frequently seeking to prioritize—contrary to the participants own declarations—a preliminary stage of the discussion while disregarding the final act of 1729, along with the subsequent clarifications in 1730 and 1736) to support their cause that the church should be latitudinarian or not. If we allow the original presbyters to have a consistent voice, their view may be ascertained.

I admit that if one only looks at one action from a partial record—or if his professors fail to inform him about the rest of the record—indeed, some confusion may result. However, if the totality of the record is included (which I tried to do in my essay, “Re-examining the Re-examiners of the Adopting Act”), then the matter is fairly clear.

Charles Hodge said the same thing and argued his case persuasively in his *Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church*. He noted (and I think his quotation, since he was much closer to the original facts than we, should be heard in full):

When they say that they adopt the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* as the confession of their faith, their language admits of but one interpretation. This was the very form in which the subscription was made in the strict Presbytery of New Castle. To make this mean that they adopted only so much of the Confession as is essential to the gospel, would be to suppose a use of language such as never before was made, at least by honest men. If a man says he adopts the *Thirty Nine Articles* of the church of England as the articles of his faith; is he ever understood to mean that he adopts those portions of them merely which are essential to the gospel? Or, if another says he adopts the *Decrees of the Council of Trent*, can he honestly mean that he adopts so much as is not inconsistent with the *Augsburg Confession*? Such a use of language would be inconsistent with the least confidence in the intercourse of life. It is not the meaning of the terms, and cannot honestly be made their meaning. Again, when the Synod say that every candidate must declare “his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of the said confession,” there is but one meaning that can be fairly put upon their language. The essential parts of a confession are those parts

which are essential to its peculiar character. No man receives all the essential articles of a popish creed, who receives no more than is consistent with Protestantism. All such subscriptions are mockery and falsehood. If the Synod intended by the essential articles of the Confession the essential articles of the gospel, why mention the Confession at all? The Presbyteries, surely, could pick out the necessary doctrines of the gospel from the Bible, as easily as from the Confession. The interpretation, therefore, which would make the Synod mean by the expressions just quoted, that they adopted, and required others to adopt, those articles merely of the Confession which are essential to the gospel, is inconsistent with all just and honest use of language. Thus far then this act admits of but one interpretation consistent with candour and fair dealing on the part of its authors.

Q. From your study has there been a particular doctrine that has ignited the controversy over the years?

I'm not sure that any one particular issue has sparked this controversy. More likely, the PCA—as part of its normal maturing process—begins to discuss this important aspect, which was not that imperative in the earliest period of her life. It may also represent a conflict between approaches to truth and exegesis. Throughout the history of this issue, those who favored fixed truth and didn't believe that modernity was so compelling as to require us to update our theology tended to be more comfortable with subscribing to a time-tested confession. Those who were inclined to see theological formulation as frequently evolving (“the living constitution” view of the confession), or who thought that cultural change or fresh academic discoveries warranted accommodation, frequently tended to see subscription as a return to obscurantism or else as inhibitory of personal freedom.

Q. Is this issue basically one of hermeneutics—hermeneutics of ordination vows, doctrinal standards and the scriptures themselves or is the core issue something else?

The hermeneutic of our history has been provided by earlier scholars, although more liberals lent their hand to a broadening revisionism over the past several generations than conservatives did to a defense of orthodoxy. Thus, under this single cover, one can find the historical materials needed to arrive at a reasonable understanding of the intended meaning of our vows and the embrace of our confession.

The core issue, again, is: what is biblical? If the confession adequately summarizes biblical truth and categories, I can think of no reason not to subscribe/agree to it and appreciate it. If, however, a confession is severely

flawed or biblically defective, then it should be retired. So, the core issue is: what saith the Lord?

Q: Once a reader has completed your book, what do you hope he or she gains from it?

Hopefully after a reader wades through the essays contained in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, he will see that there is a long-standing tradition of adhering to the same truths generation after generation. I also hope that misconceptions about previous Presbyterian practice—and some of the many urban legends (see below) that have arisen recently—can be put to rest. One should have a better sense of how earlier generations approached this idea: how can we summarize biblical truth and help Christians for generations to come avoid falling into theological ditches. This becomes a very practical issue; it is certainly not for theologians only. We think many Elders and Deacons can also benefit from this.

Among the urban legends are that confessional subscription:

- a. Actually guarantees or leads to liberalism all by itself. It's almost comical to hear so many people repeat such nonsense, probably repeated most by those who could not empirically document this claim to save their professional lives.
- b. Implies a coldness, dead orthodoxy, or snuffing out of evangelistic zeal. The church growth rates during the Old School's dominance, complete with strong subscription, was even superior to our most ambitious Vision 2000 plans.
- c. Elevates a confession to parity with Scripture. The Confession itself denies this in its opening chapter.
- d. Automatically distorts biblical theology to fit preconceived systematic theology approaches. Good exegesis, of course, never contradicts correct theology.
- e. Will run many fine, godly men out of the church, when fine, godly men agree with the overwhelming majority of what is contained in our confession.
- f. Curtails intellectual freedom. One might wish to compare either the *Southern Presbyterian Review* or Princeton's *Biblical Reportory* with any modern Reformed journal to see which kind of subscription fostered superior intellectual exploration and discourse.

Most of these unsubstantiable myths can easily be dispelled if one is as interested in reasonableness and research as in unwittingly perpetuating groundless urban legends.

Q: Why is a knowledge of a history of subscription important to our present day discussions?

Just last week I saw a report on the recently concluded EPC General Assembly. Their church suggested that a vow be added to their constitution, which would require officers to strictly subscribe to a 7-point creed, with no exceptions allowed. That denomination also will require new ordinands and transfers to subscribe to the *Westminster Standards'* system of doctrine by requiring that exceptions to that confession be (a) written and (b) approved by a majority vote of the court, unless the court disallows the stated exceptions. If that approach gains final ratification, the EPC may be among the most subscriptionist Presbyterian churches in our country! I commend the EPC for a rational, non- emotive, approach to this issue. They seem to be wanting to ensure orthodoxy and candor at the same time. They may also sense that they need a time-tested practice like subscription in order to keep doctrinal diversity from becoming excessive.

Of course, that approach is similar to what other confessional Presbyterians have done in the past. What is notable, however, is that even some stalwart Presbyterian denominations are fearful of stating explicitly what they believe and what is not acceptable. In the modern climate of relativism that is a well-proven formula for ecclesiastical disaster.

So, yes, this issue continues to be important and will remain important, especially wherever there are concerted pushes to modernize or change the doctrine of the church. This is not a denominational-specific concern.

Moreover, as Ian Hamilton points out, weakening of the process of subscription reveals a certain pathology. For students of confessional history, Ian Hamilton has provided a fine study [*The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy: Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1990)], chronicling the decline of confessional orthodoxy among Scottish Presbyterians from 1730-1879. In that American Presbyterianism followed a similar course, all those who wish to see an antecedent to our own symbological history would do well to absorb this chapter from Scottish history. Hamilton identifies the pathology of confessional relaxation in a sequence moving first from a general ambiguity over the "sense" of the confession, to particular denials (principally over the atonement and other particularities of Calvinism), then on to the failure in practice to discipline, onward to a zeal for union valued over purity, finally to actual revision of the confession and dilution of the subscription vow itself. For those who have seen this repeated in American Presbyterianism, his study could be a helpful precaution for the future.

Q: What are some practical ways elders can train their congregation as to an awareness and importance of the subscription issue?

Besides reading our book and learning to identify pathologies, one thing churches need to do more of is to illustrate (like we use negative examples to instruct our children) what happens when officers or ministers begin to depart from confessional or scriptural truths. Doctrinal departures always spawn practical dangers as well. Another thing is to train officers in the history of this question; that again is one of the targets for *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*. Moreover, different people should obtain expertise in one related issue, not necessarily every issue, and make their research available to others.

We also recommend that ***all church libraries have a copy*** of this book for study and that pastors give copies of this to their officers for their officer training classes. It would also be helpful for officers to consult the recent General Assembly presentations on this subject at the PCA website and compare those with these materials. Moreover, several presbyteries are/have found it helpful to devote some discussion time to this matter, using several of these essays.

Q: In his article "The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession," R. L. Dabney makes the point that the system of doctrine must stand together. To loosen one part of it loosens the whole. This seems to be a very covenantal approach to this issue in opposition to the individualistic approach that is so common today. How does this volume help one to work through a covenantal vs. individual approach to subscription?

I think Dabney was insightful as usual in that comment. It *is* a matter of worldview. Like it or not, the truths God has revealed are interwoven. They do hang together, like a cluster of grapes—not merely individual raisins. It is like a 'golden chain' as one Puritan put it. If we remove one link, the whole chain is different or useless. We should be careful about cavalierly removing links. Our volume appreciates the role of the community of faith and tries to protect against a rampant individualism.

Q: There has been some talk of making the process to amend the confession easier. How do you believe this would impact the subscription discussion?

I am a firm believer in amending defective parts of a confession. If the Westminster authors were more guided by their cultural blinders or particular interests than by the Scripture, future generations should not be burdened by their shortsightedness. The problem for revisers—not only

today but yesterday as well—is that the divines were pretty fair exegetes. Their careful labor and broad understanding of theology, coupled with their healthy sharpening debates, led them to produce an enduring summary of biblical truth. They did not distort many biblical ideas. If they are wrong, and that can be proven from Scripture, then there is nothing wrong with the church altering its confession.

It is also wise to require a super-majority for that in order to prevent willy-nilly declensions or demagoguery from holding sway. To lower the requirements to amend the confession was fortunately repudiated for abundantly sound reasons at our recent General Assembly. It would be one of the most imprudent things imaginable to convert a sound process into an ever-fluctuating patchwork of what a whimsical 51% might think at one or two particular General Assemblies. After all, if we value the unity of the church at all, there's nothing wrong or unrealistic about expecting that changes to our doctrine should occur only after long and convincing periods of discussion, criticism, prayer, and study.

Nature abhors a vacuum. So does the interpretation of church history. The 1729 Adopting Act, a critical event for American Presbyterianism and the focal point of many of these chapters, did not crop up *ex nihilo*. It had a rich pre-history and a context, which assists us in understanding its meaning and intent. Accordingly, a survey of Reformed implementations in European settings prior to the American Adopting Act will be helpful. Concentrating primarily on the practices or attempts at subscription in England, Scotland, and Ireland, this study can fill in some of background of the period prior to the Adopting Act. The primary focus on the ethos of subscription within the United Kingdom is justified on two grounds: (1) Our own Confession was rooted in the soil of Great Britain, having been produced by the Assembly at Westminster, London (1643-1648), and (2) The majority of our colonial forefathers were from British, Scottish, or Irish stock. The implicit thesis, of course, is that the Adopting Act itself adopted some of the practice and ideology of these—not springing as it were afresh from the head of Zeus, or without precedent. Moreover, a familiarity with these previous episodes can help inoculate against repeating the very same errors.

Hence, the two questions—which are applicable in nearly every age—that are really behind all these essays are: (1) What *did* the best of the tradition of our Presbyterian forefathers hold as the wisest manner of confessing orthodoxy? and (2) *Ought* we hold to the

same manner of confessional practice today, or have the dynamics changed so as to justify a departure from their earlier manner? The second question is the “payoff” question, but we will not approach this with a bald pragmatism characteristic of William James. All too often, the impatient and a-historical among us insist on attempting to answer the second query before the first, which is as naive as it is imprudent. (Source: *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*)

Q. Where do you see the subscription debate headed in the PCA?

The PCA recently had a healthy debate about this subject. It seems that as long as we discuss things in the abstract there is interest in exploration. However, when we come to specifics, few want to tackle hard questions, and we have an acquired deficiency of either punting on the hard issues or concocting pluralistic approaches, which don't really settle anything. I hope that over the next generation we will mature enough to be able to discuss our differences calmly and resort to Scripture alone, instead of conveniently reverting to the tradition of a previous generation. Until we can get beyond some of the phobias surrounding this and other issues, I'm afraid that our church will only be wracked by more suspicion, pluralism, intolerance, and confusion. I continue to believe that if we would honestly deal with this issue in a consistent manner, we might forestall divisiveness, too. To face this issue honestly might be the most loving legacy we could donate to the future.

Also, I'd like to note that many have misunderstood or ascribed dark motives to those who wish to utilize subscription to refine and protect our church. One is not automatically a Pharisee if he is heartily committed to biblical truth and desires to see it championed. Rather than supporting one particular brand or set of views, I believe that fair or consistent subscription is a tool, which is neutral regarding certain customary categories.

Let me explain what I mean. One essay in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* noted that when a man stated a scruple or exception—itsself an act of admirable humility and refreshing submissiveness—that scruple became an occasion for additional probity. The stating of exceptions, then, is a tool—no more, no less. Then the court of original jurisdiction must decide if that exception or candidate bears some risk to the peace and purity of the church, now or in the future. I would think we'd all want that. This honest candor provides an exploratory mechanism by which the governing body (not the individual's judgment alone) can discern if the exception is *semantic* or *substantive*. Of course, early American Presbyterianism and the best of our Reformed tradition has not allowed substantive disagreement

with biblical-confessional truth. With the slightest sensitivity to the original audiences, we can also observe that thinkers ranging from Charles Hodge to John Murray permitted a presbytery to probe into semantic scruples to see if they threatened any part of the church's core.

So, this is actually a fair method, although it may upset people with numerous disagreements with the confession. For example, some theologians probably should ask for exceptions to the confession in view of some formulations (see my comments on pp. 225-236 of <http://capo.org/holdingfast.pdf> for more on this); similarly, those who believe that gifts related to revelation continue should humbly request an exception, too. Moreover, to be consistent, if we wish to interpret an original intent on the days of creation, we probably should on exclusive psalmody (which is not *my* practice or conviction) as well. All of these may be handled as many presbyteries treat exceptions on the Sabbath. It is not onerous for a man to state his disagreements and then submit to the corporate judgment of pious presbyters. In addition, it may defuse suspicion and distrust.

What is important, and what I have been concerned to see, is a fair and equitable standard instead of every presbytery doing what is right in its own eyes.

Q. How can readers obtain a copy of this volume?

Readers can clip/send this coupon below for a 20% discount (please add \$2.00 for s/h per book); or books can be ordered from Amazon.com.

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with this excerpt from the book:

May I conclude

Still a word of caution is in order, lest we galvanize subscription into a golden calf. By itself, it will neither heal nor preserve. That is rather easily demonstrated; further, it is such an instance of stating the more than obvious, i. e., that confessional subscription alone will not preserve the purity of the church, that it should by now produce yawns when uttered as a defense for non-subscription. Its very utterance, still misses the real issue and once again blurs the is/ought distinction. Even under the best case scenario, confessional subscription must also be supported by the entire community, reinforced, and if lacking, be disciplined.

Perhaps Drysdale is correct, both in his analysis for subscription, as well as in his estimate of its maximum utility:

For subscription, to be free and unoppressive yet *secure*, must be *preceded* by thoroughly good and efficient training in the theology to be taught, and *followed up* by a process of *constantly operative discipline* by mutual consent. They forgot, too, that the easy-going state of goodwill toward all speculative tendencies was only a latitudinarian or intellectual charity—the charity of an easy-going and secularly-minded indifferentism, and

very far removed indeed from the *Christian charity* which, in a very different sense, *believeth all things*. They forgot that the charity of speculative intellectualism is painfully deficient in enthusiasm, self-sacrifice, and *life*.

A Dangerous Book
The Prayer of Jabez:
Breaking Through to the Blessed Life
Reviewed by Bruce Davis

Mr. Davis pastors First Presbyterian Church in North Port, Florida

In I Chronicles 4:9-10, the prayer of Jabez is recorded. *"And Jabez was more honourable than his brethren: and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, 'Because I bare him with sorrow.' And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, 'Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me!' And God granted him that which he requested."* Jabez sought the blessing of God and asked for His protection, provision, and guidance; God was pleased in His sovereign good pleasure to answer this prayer for His Name's sake. Many people now know about this prayer through a short (92 pages) best-selling book, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*, by Bruce Wilkinson, founder and president of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries in Atlanta. In fact, over 4 million copies have been sold since the book was published about sixteen months ago. The author asserts that "People...are excited about what happens to them when they pray Jabez. They get a whole new vision of what can happen to them. God can bless them a whole lot, but they must ask for it. . . ."

The publisher's promotion on the back cover and the author's preface to the book clearly reveal the unbiblical direction in which the book will take its readers. *"Do you want to be extravagantly blessed by God? Are you ready to reach for the extraordinary? To ask God for the abundant blessings He longs to give you? Join Bruce Wilkinson to discover how the remarkable prayer of a little-known Bible hero can release God's favor, power, and protection. You'll see how one daily prayer can help you leave the past behind - and break through to the life you were meant to live.* (from the back cover)

"I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. It is brief - only one sentence with four parts - and tucked away in the Bible, but I believe it contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor

with God. This petition has radically changed what I expect from God and what I experience every day by His power. In fact, thousands of believers who are applying its truths are seeing miracles happen on a regular basis." (from author's preface)

A true call to prayer should be welcomed anytime, and such a call to prayer takes seriously what the Word of God teaches on prayer. *The Prayer of Jabez* fails miserably in this regard. The book unashamedly deviates greatly from historic Christian teaching on prayer that is consistent with the Word of God and the Reformed confessions and catechisms. The flaws and weaknesses of the author's theology are consistently promoted as biblical truth throughout the book. From a biblical perspective, this book is a very dangerous book. The errors are subtle because the author uses broadly Christian vocabulary, language that is strikingly similar and identical to the language used in word-faith and other charismatic movements. Many points the author asserts are true are simply not true when evaluated in the light of God's Word. Some examples are the following statements: "He (God) becomes great through you." "When you take little steps, you don't need God." "He (God) will never send someone to you whom you cannot help."

Wilkinson advocates praying the prayer of Jabez verbatim, word-for-word, for a month in order to see the power of God released in our lives. For Wilkinson, the prayer has become the secret to success in every endeavor. God is viewed as a butler who responds in a mechanical manner when certain words are recited. One critique of this book stated that it is so easy for individuals to "read this book and come away thinking that prayer is a series of inputs and outputs." What seems to matter to the author is finding the right formula to pray and then repeating the formula until the desired results occur. His is a gimmicky approach to prayer. He asserts that the formula he has discovered, if followed diligently according to His instructions, guarantees successful praying. *"I challenge you to make the Jabez prayer for blessing part of the daily fabric of your life. To do that, I encourage you to follow unwaveringly the plan outlined here for the next thirty days. By the end of that time, you'll be noticing significant changes in your life, and the prayer will be on its way to becoming a treasured, lifelong habit."* (p.86)

For Wilkinson, the main thing in prayer is not a focus on God's character and ways and purposes but on man's character and method of praying and his desires, which God is obligated to grant him as the prayer of Jabez is offered to God on a daily basis. Prayer, according to Wilkinson's interpretation of Jabez's prayer, is not God-centered and based on the merits of Jesus Christ but rather man-centered and based on man's desires and formula in approaching God. In this bizarre approach to prayer, we effectively cause God to become our servant. We end up boxing Him into

a corner so that He *has* to answer our prayers just as we want Him to. We put God into a position so that He cannot say "no" to the countless repetitions of this prayer. Thus God is coerced and manipulated into answering our prayers. He is put into a position so that He *has* to give you what He longs to give you but wouldn't give you apart from responding to this particular prayer.

Wilkinson's book is surely a cruel book in that it teaches if we fail to see God's power unleashed and receive miracles by praying this prayer, we are undoubtedly spiritually deficient. Our faith has not brought about the desired blessings. What devastation there must be when a person, while praying this prayer, goes through one of God's dark and frowning providences, e.g. a death of a child, a terminal illness, a loss of employment. What is God doing by ordering these hardships and afflictions while the person is busy praying the prayer of Jabez on a daily basis? Wilkinson offers no biblical answers.

There are many things in the book that contribute to its being unsound theologically and unbiblical in its propositions. The book advocates that it is the will of God that His people always prosper in material, earthly things, and that His people should have whatever they desire. The prayer of Jabez, prayed according to Wilkinson's instructions, is supposed to guarantee the obtaining of the desire of our hearts. This kind of thinking and acting is consistent, not with the Word of God, but with the health, wealth, and prosperity perversion of the gospel and the "name it and claim it" crowd. Wilkinson's careless and reckless approach to prayer is an affront to God's people who suffer for His sake according to His will.

The book does not give Jesus Christ the preeminence in our prayers. In fact, our abiding union with Jesus Christ and our access to the Father through Him is minimized at best and largely ignored in the book. Christ's name is mentioned only a few times in the whole book. Sin is discussed as a barrier before God in our prayers, but it is viewed as something that we can make right ourselves, a mere bad habit that we can break rather than a disease which is incurable apart from the grace of God in Christ.

A great emphasis in the book is on rituals, formulas, and repetition. Prayer is seen to be efficacious and virtuous the more it is repeated. Daily and weekly rituals are suggested in the book in order to assist people in praying the prayer of Jabez over and over; but our Lord warns us in the gospels of the danger of vain repetition and empty rituals in prayer. Wilkinson's overall position on prayer seems to be unscriptural and an eclectic blending of various prayer traditions with a veneer of Christianity.

Wilkinson ignores the centrality of the Lord's Prayer as our model prayer, and, for all intents and purposes and without absolutely any biblical warrant, substitutes the prayer of Jabez for the Lord's Prayer. Our Lord

Jesus Christ teaches one thing; Bruce Wilkinson teaches the opposite. Who is right and who is wrong should not be a difficult judgment to make.

Wilkinson uses the word "miracles" very frequently and loosely in this book. His understanding of miracles is not according to the Bible. The prayer of Jabez, which becomes a selfish and self-centered prayer through Wilkinson's spin on it, is to be repeated in order to bring about the release of God's blessings and receive miracles.

Wilkinson's testimony is that his experiences over the years validate his method of praying. His own "success stories" and those of others are reinforcement of his conviction that vain repetition of this prayer results in the prosperity of the one praying. Therefore, the experiences of men are exalted above the Word of God according to Wilkinson. But this is no different from the many adherents of false religions who ascribe validity and legitimacy to their respective religions and beliefs because of whatever "successes" they have. So many assume that anything "good" that happens to them after they begin engaging in some ritual must be because of the ritual itself. Wilkinson, by his own testimony, falls into this camp.

Is it legitimate to use biblically the prayer of Jabez in our own prayer life? Of course it is. But is it the only prayer we should pray? Of course not. There are many other prayers in the Bible that should be incorporated into our personal and corporate prayers. But in answer to the question, "Do you Jabez?" you should answer a resounding "No!" Following the instructions of this book will be spiritually disastrous. Although there are true statements among all the false and anti-biblical teachings of the book, at best all the author offers his readers is spiritual fluff that is as helpful to the readers' spiritual development as a teaspoon is to someone wanting to empty an ocean.

It is disappointing to see this work from Wilkinson's pen when he has on other occasions given helpful contribution to Christ's kingdom and His peoples' sanctification. Christians would be better served to study the Puritans on prayer or meditate on answers and Scriptures given in the Larger Catechism for the Lord's Prayer.



BOOK REVIEWS

Coronation of Glory by Deborah Meroff. Published by Inheritance Publications, Box 154, Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada T0G 1R0; P.O. Box 366, Pella, Iowa 50219; (800)563-3594; 302 pp.; pbk; \$12.90. Reviewed by Samuel Snapp.

Most often the heroes of our day are sports stars, political figures or leaders of major movements whose external lives appear to be in order but whose internal lives are in complete disarray. Some are struggling with drug addictions, others are dealing with marital problems, while still others attempt to overcome money-management problems. Lady Jane Grey was a young adult whose internal life was grounded in the solid, unshakable rock of Jesus Christ while her external life appeared to be in shambles as she was tossed to and fro in the political turmoils of her day. She was an uncommon and unrecognized hero, but a hero nonetheless.

Lady Jane exhibited much maturity at a young age. She was a diligent student and loved to read and learn. Her tutors enjoyed teaching her and challenging her bright mind. Lady Jane used her talents and energies wisely as she studied during her youth.

Being obedient to her parents was an important priority for Lady Jane as it should be for any child. She did not obey her parents just during the times that she felt like it, but she faithfully exhibited a daily obedience toward them. Many times Lady Jane was put into situations where she was told to do things by her parents that she did not want to do. She could have easily rebelled in these instances or had a rebellious spirit, but Jane did not. She set out to obey her parents as completely as possible and with a cheerful attitude even though many of Jane's parents' motives were self-centered and hurtful to Jane.

During a time when there was much religious and political strife, Lady Jane recognized that true peace comes from none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. Lady Jane lived to please her Lord and Savior and longed for others to come to a saving knowledge of Christ as well. Even during the last moments of her life on this earth, she sought to show the Catholic priest, sent to try and obtain a recantation from her which would have secured her release, the errors of his ways.

Written in an easy-to-read flow, this book is packed with biographical information about Lady Jane and does a good job depicting what daily life may have been like for her. Life for 16th century English royalty was uncertain. Much depended on what marital connections one made, amount of money one could amass, and size of armies one could raise. Throughout all of this, Lady Jane trusted in a sovereign God whom she knew controls all things.

A breath of fresh air in a day when autonomous thought is predominant and man is taught to do what is right in his own eyes, *Coronation of Glory* brings to the forefront the Biblical importance of obedience to parents and authority. Parents and children alike will find this book enjoyable to read. While learning about the life of Lady Jane Grey, readers will be challenged to live faithfully in service to the Lord Jesus on a daily basis.

The Education of Geneva by Madison R. Browntrout. Published by Morning Star Ventures, P.O. Box 110993, Anchorage, Alaska 99511; 239 pp.; spiral bound; © 2000. Reviewed by Byron Snapp.

How are parents to carry out their vow made at their child's baptism to "... teach (him) the doctrine of our holy religion, and that you will strive, by all the means of God's appointment, to bring (him) up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (BCO 56-5)? The author of this volume takes this vow seriously. He communicated in a series of twenty-one letters basic biblical truths to his teenage daughter. These letters have now been compiled in a book with a wide margin that provides space for the reader to make notes for future reference. I need to say at the outset that the author does not attempt to cover every doctrine or topic that godly parents need to teach their children.

Instead this volume is for the purpose of teaching covenant youth how to think. The author states the purpose in these words "*The Education of Geneva* is an attempt to present essential elements of a Christian theory of knowledge in a popular form. The use of formal theological and philosophical terms has been kept to a minimum" (p.8). The pages that follow reveal that the author achieves his goal.

Some of the topics covered include the antithesis that exists between Christian and nonchristian, how God reveals Himself to man, the canonicity of Scripture, apologetics and the sufficiency of Scripture. Chapters are well-written and full of content that needs to be communicated to covenant children.

As parents we cannot push off our responsibility to biblically instruct our children to our local church or Christian school. As Deuteronomy 6 reminds us, this is primarily our duty day and night. The author has provided the reader with a very helpful book. This book can be read by parents or by parents with their teenage youth. It can also be incorporated into a home schooling curriculum. Readers may want to skip some chapters. They may also want to take the concepts taught and develop them in a different format.

The author has written a volume that is needed, knowledgeable and practical. The next generation will be well served by having an understanding of the information contained in this book.

The Lion of the North: A Tale of the Times of Gustavus Adolphus by G.A. Henty. Published by Preston/Speed Publications, 51 Ridge Road, Mill Hall, PA 17751; www.prestonspeed.com; 323 pp; hbk; © 2000. Reviewed by Byron Snapp.

Warfare has at times marked the march of Christianity. In this volume, Henty takes the readers back to one such era. In the 1630's Ferdinand, the emperor of Austria determined to crush Protestantism throughout Germany. This was a major part of the Thirty Years' War. Due to the war's length only the first few years are covered herein.

The book's hero, Malcolm Graeme, is a native of Scotland. As a teenager he accompanies his father and other Scotsmen to join the army of the valiant Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus, who is waging war against the forces of Ferdinand. Religious wars are often especially bloody and brutal. This one was no different. Without descriptive gore, the reader can easily imagine the blood and brutality as he accompanies Malcolm to the battlefield in many engagements, as Malcolm and other captives face the ire of enraged peasants and the isolation of enslavement and imprisonment.

Through valiant victory and despairing defeats Malcolm exhibits the character of leadership. Maintaining a keen presence of mind, he ably snatches victory from the jaws of defeat often by risking his own life on behalf of others. Time and again he employs successful disguise, extraordinary use of ordinary objects and the development of dormant skills to escape from the seemingly inescapable and to elude the enraged enemy.

This volume is far more than an exciting story. It is also an accurate history of real people. The reader will be confronted by the valiant Gustavus Adolphus, his battlefield rival Tilley and the courageous Wallenstein. The reader is introduced to German terrain and locales, political wrangling and battlefield weaponry, armor and tactics. Henty does not hide the character flaws of the heroic Adolphus and Wallenstein.

In a subsequent volume, *Won By The Sword*, Henty continues the account of this war.

Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope by Keith A. Mathison. P&R Publishing, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, N.J. 08865-0817; 287 pp; pbk; © 1999. Reviewed by Byron Snapp.

Having fallen into disfavor for decades, postmillennialism is once again being discussed with increasing interest as evidenced by the continued publication of a number of books on this eschatological position. Keith Mathison has contributed to the discussion with this helpful, very readable volume. Believing that this view of the advance of God's kingdom prior to

Christ's second coming "is most consistent with the relevant texts of Scriptures, a covenantal approach to Scripture, and the nondisputed doctrines of Reformation theology" (p.10), he backs up his thesis in fifteen chapters.

The author examines numerous texts in the Old and New Testament showing how God's unfolding of covenantal theology sheds increasing light in the future progress of His kingdom in history. He also briefly examines the development of eschatological thought in church history. He rightly points out that this doctrine was slowly developed even during the Reformation, no doubt greatly due to the necessity of focusing on the basic doctrines of salvation, scripture and the sacraments.

He discusses the basic doctrines of Reformed theology such as the Trinity, soteriology and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Mathison explains how these doctrines are most consistently understood with postmillennialism in mind.

He does not overlook texts referred to as supporting an amillennial or premillennial position. He cogently, yet compassionately, explains the errant thinking in trying to explain these texts from either of these perspectives.'

The author brings his work to a close by answering biblical and practical objections to postmillennialism. These objections include, the claim of historical decline and that a commitment to this eschatological view undermines the watchfulness Christians are to have for Christ's return. Biblical passages examined include Matthew 7:13-14 and Luke 18:7-8.

Three appendices provide additional insight to the subject. In these, Mathison examines briefly the Seventy Weeks (Daniel 9:24-27) and eschatological passages in I and II Thessalonians. The third appendix is a critique of full preterism. Full preterism teaches that Christ's Second Coming occurred in 70 A.D. at the Fall of Jerusalem. Postmillennialism is not to be confused with this false doctrine.

Each chapter concludes with a one-paragraph summary of material covered in that chapter. This provides the reader with a brief review opportunity not only at the chapter's end but also at a later date when he desires a quick reminder of the chapter's contents.

This book is a joy to read. Its style is non-threatening. It provides a good introduction to postmillennial thought for those unfamiliar with its basic tenets. It also gives a good review and perhaps some new insights to those familiar with the position and those committed to it. This is a good volume for church libraries and church book tables to add to inventories.