**Where Are We Headed?**

A Call for Doctrinal Revival in the PCA

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I have not been in the PCA as long as some other ministers and elders, but I am not ignorant of the founding fathers of this denomination. I have read their books and I have heard them speak.

I am very well acquainted with one specific founding father that, perhaps, remains forgotten by many – Dr. Morton H. Smith. (Dr. Smith has, perhaps, also been sidelined in more modern times due to a 1964 article he wrote on race relations. But, to be fair, many Presbyterian conservatives in the south who were to form the PCA were also wrestling with that same issue at the time.) Dr. Smith served the PCA as her first Stated Clerk from 1973 to 1988 and as her moderator in 2000. At a pre-Assembly seminar in 1992, Dr. Smith addressed his audience on the topic of “Why We Should Be Strict or Full Subscriptionists”. His address, along with two other articles on the subject, as well as an article written by Professor John Murray, were published that same year by Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary under the title The Case for Full Subscription to the Westminster Standards in the Presbyterian Church in America.

Many among us who talk about the founding of the PCA – or, at least, their memories of those days – will, understandably, have their favorites. The heroes they remember are the ones that made the most impression on them, the ones they wish to be like, the ones who held to the vision they share and want to build on. But there are others among those founding members. Sometimes, I fear, they are ones that some today do not agree with so much, and do not wish to recall or learn from, because they regard their viewpoints as less than ideal.

Perhaps that is how Dr. Smith is regarded today – as less then ideal? Dr. Smith was not only a founding father of our denomination but a loyal and vital servant. And he was representative of an entire wing of fellow pastors and ruling elders who had their own vision for this denomination. But another wing of pastors and elders have readily overlooked, sidelined, and ignored their brothers within the PCA. I believe it was to them that Dr. Smith spoke when he said:

*“Let me say, as one of the founding fathers of this Church, and as one who served you for 16 years as the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, I love the PCA, and do not want to see it rent asunder by schism. I come to you not as a ‘hard nosed Calvinist’ but as a simple believer in the Lord Jesus, and in His Holy Word. I come as a ‘father in the Church’ who has paid his dues and earned a right to speak to you on this matter. ... One of the most significant ways in which our forefathers have sought to preserve the purity and unity of the Church has been through officer subscription to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, made in our ordination vows.”*

After an eager and aggressive beginning, the PCA experienced exciting growth for her first several years. It was, indeed, hard to find anything to criticize in those days; and the more ideas and more initiative, the better. But lately, we have seen that growth slow concernedly. What to do? “More of the same” some tell us. We need even more energy, more freedom, more progressive thinking. Then, there is the rise of other Presbyterian denominations that are growing as well. We look over at them and think that we need to imitate them. We need to cast off more and more restraints. We need to make our tent broader.

But is that the answer? Do we know that will work? Can evangelism (church growth) really occur when we cast off “unnecessary” restraints (i.e., care toward doctrine)? What are our true marching orders? Are we to follow after culture – no matter where it is going – and call out to it that we do not want to be left behind? Do we try to run out in front of the parade and act as though we are so “with it” that we are actually leading the way?

Some who are wondering about this would insist that “history has nothing to teach us”. But is that true? Take a moment, if you will, and recall to mind all that boring church history you were taught in seminary, and all the historical, Presbyterian milestones that you had to memorize for your ordination exams because they were considered significant.

1643 – WCF – So fine a document that it is still embraced as the doctrinal backbone not

only of Presbyterianism but of other Reformed denominations today.

1683 – Francis Makemie lands in Maryland and begins planting Presbyterian churches

1729 – The Adopting Act

*All the ministers of this Synod … have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and*

*in declaring the said Confession and Catechisms to be the confession of their faith, …*

(The ministerial vow was composed so as to require complete allegiance to Conf.;

while allowing presbyteries to consider and approve of areas of individual scruples)

*Do you sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith ?*

*And in case any minister of this Synod… shall have any scruple with respect to… said*

*Confession or Catechisms, he shall … declare his sentiments, … if the Synod or*

*Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and*

*necessary in doctrine, worship, or govt.*

1730s-1743 – 1st Great Awakening

Scots-Irish immigrants bolster the number of Presbyterians;

Samuel Hemphill tried for heterodoxy

1736 – Declaration re: The Adopting Act post Hemphill

*[T]he Synod doth declare that the Synod have adopted and still adhere to the Westminster*

*Confession, Catechisms, and Directory, without the least variation or alteration, …*

The Synod of 1737 tightened ordination requirements banning itinerant preaching and

requiring an education from an officially chartered school.

Old Side/New Side controversy erupts

1741 – Presbyterians split over Old Side/New Side controversy

New Side churches grow faster

1746 – New Side commissions College of New Jersey (Princeton University)

1758 – Old Side/New Side reunite

returning substantial authority to presbyteries as opposed to synods

1796 – Cumberland Presbytery formed, allowing ministers to assent to WCF only …

*“so far as they deemed it agreeable to the Word of God” (particularly in view was a dislike of the*

*doctrine of predestination was in view).*

1810 – 2nd Great Awakening breaks out under Cumberland Presbytery minister in KY

1812 – Princeton Seminary founded

1816-26 – 50,000 members added to church roles

1823 – Charles Finney taken under care by St. Lawrence Presbytery & licensed to preach

*“Unexpectedly to myself they asked me if I received the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian*

*Church. I had not examined it; - that is, the large work, containing Catechisms and*

*Presbyterian Confession. This had made no part of my study. I replied that I received it for*

*substance of doctrine, so far as understood it. But I spoke in a way that plainly implied, I think,*

*that I did not pretend to know much about it.”*

Finney went on to enlarge New Side interests, completely change people’s perceptions of

the church, and standardized Pelagianism as his doctrine.

1870 - Scottish Common Sense

1837 Old School New School

called for a return embraced “New Divinity” –

to traditional confessionalism Arminian Unversalism

& subscriptionism

moved away from Presbyterianism

and toward Congregationalism

suspicious of Revivalism desired/practiced Revivalism

1847 – James Thornwell died leaving lasting, conservative, influence on the PCUS

*“The Westminster Standards were the impregnable ramparts against error; … to teach what is*

*contrary to any statement of the doctrinal standards was to teach what is contrary to some*

*statement of doctrine in the Scriptures.” (John Girardeau)*

1858 – Presbyterian minister, James H. Brookes, Walnut Ave. Pres., St. Louis, MO

is deemed ‘the Father of American Dispensationalism’, completely abandons the

Westminster Standards in lieu of this new theology.

1878 – A.A. Hodge Both warm up to evolutionary theory

1887 – B.B. Warfield and defend a providential account of it.

*Under the spell of Darwinism, Presbyterianism became synonymous with progress, and*

*Presbyterian adjustment to the new science became a matter of denominational pride.*

*(Hart & Muether)*

1891 – Presbyterian Professor, C.A. Briggs addresses faculty and student-body of Union

Seminary, NYC, denouncing the authority of Scripture.

*“Progress in religion, in doctrine, and in life, is demanded of our age of the world more than any*

*other age.”*

Briggs attacked “orthodoxism” and called for a softening of Presbyterian (Calvinistic)

rigidity.

It was reported that the faculty and most of the students responded favorably.

Briggs was tried for heresy but was acquitted.

1901 – Henry Van Dyke chairs a committee attempting to revise the WCF

(primarily to remove election and universalize the gospel)

1910 – Presbyterian G.A. approves 5 Fundamentals as the minimum of agreement

1) The inerrancy of the Bible

2) The Virgin Birth of Christ

3) Christ’s substitutionary atonement

4) Christ’s bodily resurrection

5) Authenticity of Christ’s miracles

1922 – Ordination of women to the Office of Deacon

1923-24 – The Auburn Affirmation, signed by 1,274 ministers of the PCUSA

1) G.A. has no right to elevate “The Five Fundamentals” to “special test status” for

ordination. Liberty of thought and teaching, within the bounds of evangelical

Christianity is necessary.

2) “The Five Fundamentals” are not essential to the system of doctrine taught in

the holy Scriptures.

3) The Bible is not inerrant.

4) “The Five Fundamentals” are merely theories of those facts and doctrines.

1924 – Lewis Sperry Chafer, Presbyterian minister, establishes Dallas Theo. Seminary

*“The very fact that I did not study a prescribed course in theology made it possible for me to*

*approach the subject with an unprejudiced mind and to be concerned only with what the Bible*

*teaches.”*

1929 – Princeton Seminary Board re-organized, populated by several signers of the

Auburn Affirmation.

Westminster Theological Seminary founded, Philadelphia, PA

- claimed the mantle of “Old Princeton”

- held out and taught Westminster standards

1930 – Ordination of women to the Office of Elder

1935 – PCUSA GA takes various punitive actions against conservatives

1936 – Orthodox Presbyterian Church formed

1942 – Dr. L. Nelson Bell, Presbyterian missionary,

writes in the Southern Presbyterian Journal:

*“… to call our Southern Presbyterian Church back to her original position, a position*

*unequivocally loyal to the Word of God and the Standards of our Church.”*

1949 – Presbyterian minister, Eugene C. Blake, senior minister of Pasadena Pres. Church,

speaking at the Commencement of Princeton Seminary:

*“Any Presbyterian church that does not … ally itself with every other truly Christian church … is not a Presbyterian church. It has become a Presbyterian sect. … There is no future for a sectarian church, … no future – period!”*

1956 – Ordination of women to the Office of Minister

1960s – E.T. Thompson, Union Seminary, Richmond, VA promotes progressivism

with the goal of union with the northern Presbyterian church.

*“The church’s hostility to free and open theological inquiry marked its descent into a*

*theological dark age, ruled by an ‘unyielding Calvinism’ that was symbolized by the*

*rigid doubtlessness of Robert Dabney – the ‘dead’ hand of the past.”*

1967 – Confession of 1967 & the Book of Confessions

Neo-orthodoxy given confessional standing

Biblical inerrancy is formally rejected

Ministerial vow is now changed to:

*Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the*

*confession of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to*

*believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people*

*of God?*

*“Mainline Presbyterians created a creedal museum and put the Westminster Standards*

*under glass.” (Dr. Ed Clowney, President, Westminster Theological Seminary, Phil.)*

*“The Book of Confessions is a collection of mutually exclusive gospels.” (Dr. Cornelius Van Til,*

*Professor, Westminster Theological Seminary, Phil.)*

1969 – Early ‘Declaration of Commitment’ leading to the formation of the PCA:

*“… in obedience to our ordination vows, we must strive to preserve a confessional Church,*

*thoroughly Reformed and Presbyterian.*

*“That, being fully committed by our ordination vows to the system of doctrine set forth in the*

*Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, we must oppose all efforts to change in*

*substance or otherwise debase our historic doctrinal commitment.*

*“That should the basic theology or polity of the Church be altered or diluted, we shall be prepared*

*to take such actions as may be necessary to fulfill the obligation imposed by our ordination vows,*

*to maintain our Presbyterian faith.”*

1970 – G.A. approval of abortion on demand

1973 – PCA formed

1975 – Bill Silver, an openly gay candidate for the ministry

applied to the Presbytery of NYC.

The presbytery asked the G.A. for “definitive guidance”.

1976 – G.A. appointed a task force

(the first of several groups so appointed in the future) to study the issue.

The task force included another openly gay person, Chris Laser.

The task force was chaired by Virginia Davidson, a ruling elder,

who had already served on several committees for the Genesee Valley Presbytery,

even serving as its Moderator.

1983 – North and South Presbyterians merge into the PCUSA – membership declines

1967-1983 – loss of 1 million members

1983-2003 – loss of 1 another million members

2011- G.A. passed Amendment 10-A,

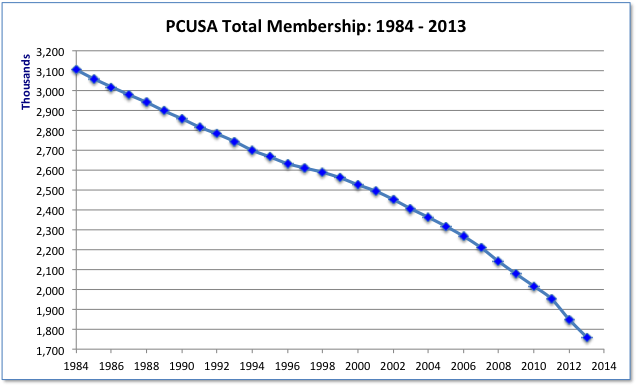
finally allowing the ordination of LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians.

Scott Anderson, first openly gay minister ordained that same year.

2012 – membership total: 1.839 million

*“Cynics predicted that if the rate of decline continued, the mainline Presbyterian Church*

*would disappear before its 350th anniversary.” (Hart & Muether)*



Now, look over that list again – carefully. Without a doubt, you are seeing not the progress of Presbyterianism in the U.S., but its decline. Yes, there are spontaneous blips of excited growth from time to time; but the overall record is clear – compromise leading to adaptation leading to political control, leading, eventually, to enforced acceptance and compliance has all resulted in decline – decline in numbers, in gospel advance, in influence upon our nation’s conscience and social order, and in our faithfulness to the Savior.

Now, read what Dr. Smith had to say about this:

*It is quite clear that the American Presbyterian Church during the 18th century intended the full subscription to the doctrinal Standards. (p. 13)*

*[Subscription] is one of, if not, the most important doctrinal issue that we as a Church face. For, if we do not come to a consensus on this matter, and that very soon, then I do not see how we shall be able to avoid repeating the tragic history of the last century, with a schism that will divide the PCA and destroy the effectiveness we have in carrying out the great commission. (p. 5)*

*A number of other illustrations could be presented, such as, views of the Sabbath, of the conduct of worship services, etc. The full subscriptionist holds to the Sabbath as set forth in the Catechisms, while the system subscriptionist may feel that he is at liberty to do a number of things forbidden by the Catechisms. (pp. 9-10)*

*[T]he Church has settled doctrinal positions on all the doctrines addressed by the Confession and Catechisms. This is the beauty and strength of the full subscription position. But, the system subscription leaves open the question of whether the Church has settled on any doctrinal position, since this is left to the Church courts. (pp. 10-11)*

*New School thought opened the door for the rise of liberalism in the mainline Presbyterian churches. The southern Presbyterian Church in 1870 saw the New School position as opening the doors for departing from the Reformed Faith and historic Presbyterianism. … The PCA as the Continuing Presbyterian Church was seeking to return to the Old School Presbyterianism of the earlier Southern Church, including its view of full subscription. To allow loose or system subscription is to open the door for the deformation of the Church. (p. 15)*

Today, there are voices leading the PCA who dismiss the history of American Presbyterianism completely out of hand as irrelevant, non-parallel, and unable to touch the issues that face the PCA today. They say we have not yet abandoned such substantive and foundational positions such as the inerrancy of Scripture, etc. But such voices are clearly in the wrong. The PCA has found significant ways to easily and readily get around the doctrinal standards without changing the confession or denying the Bible. The way has been prepared by committee after committee reporting to successive General Assemblies and, thereby, with the simple acceptance of a committee report, doctrinal positions on creation, women in authority, and the acceptance of homosexuality are already and already becoming perfectly acceptable positions for individual ministers and sessions to take.

We have allowed a legislative mechanism to be put in place which invites and will allow even greater exceptions to be taken without challenge, regard, or defense. And the depth of standing committees – all created for the purpose of doing business themselves instead of the rest of us – insulates and protects the agenda of some against the principles of others.

The system for defending the gospel has been changed. We do not have to challenge the Bible itself. We do not have to call for a change in our confession. We have simply broadened the appreciation of our differences as to how we read these things and how we will preach them. It is a *new* Neo-orthodoxy.

All of this is the very reason why a return to a united commitment to the confession of faith is necessary and critical for the church if she is to maintain her position and hold out the message of repentance and change before the world. But instead, the very notions of unity in doctrine and worship have long been set aside. I would offer that the same three issues that eroded the church in the past are the ones eating away at the very core of the PCA today:

1) the noticeable trend by individual PCA churches as well as presbyteries to lay aside, overlook, and suspend **God’s Moral Law** rather than upholding and defending it – be that in the form of their worship, in the content of their teaching, as well as in their application of Christian ethics in their members’ lives;

2) a similar forsaking of the high appreciation for our **Confessional Standards**. The taking of a similar and expanding number of exceptions among new ministers and elders have become more than routine in more and more areas of theology. Such exceptions are no longer being seriously considered or examined. Instead, they are simply “rubber-stamped” and approved without explanation, investigation, or challenge. Meanwhile, any challenge, objection or expression of disapproval has become grounds for harsh rebuke by other elders. The exceptions have become the rule;

3) a deterioration of focus regarding the Church’s calling and commission, which includes the need and purpose to hold on to the truth of God’s Word in the face of an ever-changing and ever-deteriorating culture.Rather than calling the world to repentance and faith, and teaching a Christian world and life view, many voices within the PCA now focus on accommodating to that culture, constantly changing and adapting those biblical stands in the face of social trends, behaviors, and pressures.

What is the answer? Yet more study committees? Yet more tweaking of the Book of Church Order? Yet more discussion and inclusiveness? The only answer is the answer that Dr. Smith called us to twenty-eight years ago:

*[L]et the PCA return to her original position of being a continuation of Old School Southern Presbyterianism. This means a full subscription to the doctrinal Standards of the Church, which includes all of the doctrines set forth in them. (Smith, p. 16)*