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From the Editor

In 1999 the Committee on Candidates and Credentials of the Presbytery of New York and New England asked me write a paper on the nature of confessional subscription in order to help clarify distinctions such as scruples and exceptions. This has been required reading for all candidates ever since, so I thought it might be useful to church officers. This reminded me that the origin of our confession and catechisms, the doctrinal standards to which officers subscribe, is the Puritans and their magnificent theology. It should be noted, and sometime soon corrected in the Wikipedia article on the OPC, that our doctrinal standard, though largely based on the 1640s confession and catechisms is titled, on its cover, *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*; and on its title page *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms: The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as adopted by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*. This is no small distinction because in 1788 the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America adopted a revised version of the original *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*. Chapters 20.4, 23.3, and 31.2 removed the civil magistrate “from involvement in ecclesiastical matters” (Preface, *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, viii). Subsequently a few more minor changes were made (see the Preface), and accepted in the founding era of the OPC. The most notable characteristic of our doctrinal standard is the revision of the proof texts in each of the three documents, the confession and catechisms. This is why added to the titles on the cover and the title page are the words “with Proof Texts.” This is why the General Assembly of 2001 authorized the Committee on Christian Education to publish these standards as *our* confession, since many of the editions used by ministers were the original seventeenth-century versions.

Also in this issue, William Kessler reviews a unique book by Joel Beeke and Mark Jones titled *A Puritan Theology*, which gathers the riches of the best Puritan theology under the standard rubrics of systematic theology. Kessler’s appreciative review contains a warning that we must not imitate everything about the ways that the Puritans communicated their theology, since those ways are often unique to their age. In our context he calls us “to prudent communion with our fathers, the Puritans.”

Shane Lems reviews Tim Keller’s new book *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Our newly installed general secretary of our Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension, John Shaw, will be writing on

evangelism in the city in the August-September issue of *Ordained Servant Online*.

I review a little, but useful, book of appreciation of Free Church of Scotland Minister D. A. Macfarlane, the uncle of the author, Cameron Fraser, a classmate of mine at Westminster Theological Seminary in the late 1970s.

Finally, don't miss George Herbert's poem "Conscience" with its memorable concluding couplet: "The bloody cross of my dear Lord / Is both my physic and my sword." For anyone interested in studying Herbert's poems closely, I highly recommend Jim Scott Orrick's *A Year with George Herbert: A Guide to Fifty-Two of His Best Loved Poems*, reviewed in the October 2013 *OS Online* <http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=379>.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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Ordained Servant exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

Servant Thoughts

The Nature, Limits, and Place of Exceptions and Scruples in Subscription to Our Doctrinal Standards¹

by Gregory E. Reynolds

State of the Question (*statis questionis*)

The second ordination question in the *Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Form of Government [FG] 13.9) asks: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church (Orthodox Presbyterian), as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?” To what extent does the system of doctrine bind the ordinand to the Confession of Faith and Catechisms? Do we subscribe to the *ipsissima verba* of the Confession of Faith and Catechisms? Or do we subscribe to the “system of doctrine” only? Is there a difference between a “scruple” and an “exception”? If so, what is it? How do we determine which scruples and/or exceptions, if any, are acceptable? These are the germane questions every ministerial candidate should be asking as he approaches ordination to an office in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

An Overview of the History of Subscription in the Presbyterian Church

The question before us is one that has been hotly debated throughout the history of Presbyterianism in America. The subject of subscription was not, however, new in America. Protestant subscription to creeds can be traced as far back as Calvin’s Geneva (1536).² Subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles by English Presbyterians can be found as early as 1571.³ From this period through to the beginning of the eighteenth century in the English context, according to David Hall: “Obviously subscription meant submission to the stated doctrine and a whole-hearted embracing of the *credenda*, without equivocation or mental reservation.”⁴ The Scottish context reveals a clear-cut statement

¹ This article was originally written for the Committee on Candidates and Credentials of the Presbytery of New York and New England in 1999 and revised in 2008. It has been modified.

² David W. Hall, “On the Hermeneutics of Subscription,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. David W. Hall (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1995), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

on subscription in the vow of subscription used at the 1693 General Assembly: “I do sincerely own and declare the above Confession of Faith, . . . to be the Confession of my faith, and that I own the doctrine therein contained to be the true doctrine, which I will constantly adhere to.”⁵ Confessional historian Ian Hamilton notes the shift from the earlier Scottish subscription in which the minister “owned . . . the whole doctrine contained,” to an adoption of the “general sense” of the Confession, which led to doctrinal decline by the eighteenth century.⁶ There is clear evidence that the Scottish as well as the English contexts of subscription during the time of American Presbyterian debate that led to the 1729 Adopting Act favored a very strict view of subscription.⁷

The American adoption of the Confession and Catechisms in 1729, however, is fraught with ambiguities which have led Presbyterian scholars to widely differing interpretations of the intent and consequences of that act. James Payton maintains that the outcome of that action was a *via media* on the matter of subscription which laid the foundation for the subsequent differences between Old and New Schools. He also argues that the unique precision of the Westminster Standards made it difficult to require the same unqualified subscription which the church had demanded of previous creeds such as the Three Forms of Unity.⁸ The ambiguity of the Adopting Act was also noted in the nineteenth century by strict subscriptionists Charles Hodge and A. A. Hodge.⁹ Thus the 1729 Adopting Act represents a compromise between opponents of subscription, like Jonathan Dickinson, and “strict” subscriptionists, like John Thompson and George Gillespie, within the Synod of Philadelphia.¹⁰ Those who held a mediating position in the presbytery were represented by Thomas Craighead.¹¹ Others, like Charles Hodge, who believe that a “strict” view was intended by the adopters, point to the 1736 interpretation stating the “jot and tittle” intentions of the original act. Even so Hodge understood the Act to be a “compromise . . . to avoid schism.”¹²

The cause of the ambiguity is that two separate actions were taken on September 19, 1729. In the morning, the text of the act was passed. This bound ministers to “declare their agreement in, and approbation of, the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and . . . [to] also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith.” Ministers or candidates who had “scruples” must “declare them to the Presbytery or Synod” and these bodies would “judge” as to whether these scruples were “only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government . . . not necessary points of doctrine” or not. In the afternoon session, certain scruples were considered,

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ Ibid., 11. Cf. the full and strict vow taken by licentiates on p. 12.

⁷ Ibid., 13–14.

⁸ James Payton Jr., “Background and Significance of the Adopting Act of 1729,” in *Pressing toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, eds. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 131, 134, 135. Cf. Luder G. Whitlock Jr., “The Context of the Adopting Act,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 99. For the entire text of the Adopting Act see Appendix A.

⁹ Luder G. Whitlock Jr., “The Context of the Adopting Act,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 99–100.

¹⁰ Ibid., 97ff.

¹¹ Ibid., 98–99.

¹² Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1851) in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 109.

having to do with the articles regarding the civil magistrate (chapters 20 and 23). The form of subscription, in the second vow of ordination, adopted as constitutional law by the Synod of 1788, though it does not directly quote the Adopting Act of 1729, embodies its intention.¹³ This 1788 vow is precisely the vow used by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church today (FG 13.9, see above). It should be carefully noted that the general statement of the morning action was “preliminary” to the actual Adopting Act passed in the afternoon session. The latter alone bore Synodical authority.¹⁴

Charles Hodge argued that the strict view of subscription was the intention of the adopters, while admitting “that the language of the act leaves the intention of its authors a matter of doubt.”¹⁵ Hodge doubts the integrity of those who would interpret the language of the Adopting Act to committing them to “only so much of the Confession as is essential to the gospel.”¹⁶ He insists that “all the essential and necessary articles of the said Confession” refers to the whole fabric of the document. To abstract those articles essential to the gospel from the confession obviates the need of a confession.¹⁷ The “whole concatenated statement of doctrines,” while not requiring agreement with every “proposition” or “expression” used in stating a particular doctrine in the Confession, is what ministers subscribe to.

Hodge goes on to observe that the matter of scruples is more ambiguous, but none-the-less was intended to set forth a strict view of subscription. The system of “doctrine, worship and government” cannot be separated from all of its constituent elements of what is Presbyterian. Hodge accounts for the dissatisfaction of many and the subsequent latitudinarian interpretations of the Act by the fact that the text of what was passed in the afternoon session, which contained the explanation of scruples as only referring to “some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters” was not printed and distributed with the Act itself.¹⁸ The Synod of 1730 thus had to explain that the “declaration” of the afternoon session was interpretive of the meaning of the Adopting Act passed in the morning session.

Since confusion and dissatisfaction continued in the church, the Synod of 1736 declared that “the Synod have adopted and still do adhere to the Westminster Confession, Catechisms, and Directory, without the least variation or alteration.” It reiterated that the only scruples admitted were “some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters.”¹⁹ This was passed without objection (*nemine contradicente*). Payton’s reference to this act as “abortive” is mysterious in light of this unanimity. He seems to disregard the relationship of the two parts of the act in order to make the case that the Adopting Act was intended to be a looser departure from the British and Continental tradition of strict subscription.²⁰ Several presbyteries at this time passed their own versions of subscription,

¹³ James Payton Jr., “Background and Significance of the Adopting Act of 1729,” in Dennison and Gamble, *Pressing toward the Mark*, 138.

¹⁴ George W. Knight III, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 121.

¹⁵ Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History*, in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 107.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 111–12.

²⁰ Payton “Background and Significance” in Dennison and Gamble, *Pressing toward the Mark*, 137ff.

including the very strict Presbytery of New Castle which referred to the Confession and Catechisms, “taking them in the true, genuine, and obvious sense of the words.”²¹

As noted above, the specific wording of the second vow, which we presently use, was adopted by the Synod of 1788. The words “adopt” and “receive” were used in the 1729 Adopting Act and clarified by the Synod of 1730: “to receive and adopt the Confession and Catechisms . . . in the same Manner and as fully as the Members of Synod did.” George Knight makes a convincing historical argument to prove that the phrase “System of Doctrine” refers to *each* and *every* article and doctrine of the Confession.²² In affirming it, the candidate is subscribing to the entire body of teaching in the confession as a summary of what Scripture teaches. That is, we are not saying that we believe the articles of the confession “in as much as” they teach what is Scriptural, but rather we believe that all that they teach *is* Scriptural. If we do not believe this, then we cannot in good conscience take the vow, i.e., “sincerely.”²³

Closer now to our own immediate context was the attempt by conservatives in the early part of this century to preserve the essence of historic Christianity by asserting the minimal necessity of affirming the “five fundamentals.” As Knight points out, this had the unintended effect of reducing the “essential and necessary articles” of the Adopting Act to just five, even though the 1910 action of the General Assembly referred to the “five fundamentals” as “certain essential and necessary Articles of Faith.”

When the Assembly of 1927 gave to the individual presbytery the right to determine which articles or doctrines the presbytery would consider as part of the system of doctrine of the confessional standards, the Assembly abandoned the past history of American Presbyterianism.²⁴

In reviewing this history, one thing is clear: the idea of the “system of doctrine” has been used by those holding doctrines seriously deviating from our Confession and Catechisms. The danger is in viewing the “system” as a kind of supra-confessional body of truth which transcends the text of the confession itself. This view obviates the whole idea of having a confession in the first place. This becomes especially problematic in the modern context of Neo-orthodox and Deconstructionist hermeneutics. As a carefully worded summary of the perspicuous and essential teachings of Scripture, a creed must be affirmed in its entirety as a system or not at all. A cogent warning appears in the 1834 “Act and Testimony” framed by Dr. R. J. Breckenridge as a protest of the Old School against the “loose” view of subscription held by the New School: “2. We testify against the unchristian subterfuge to which some have recourse, when they avow a general adherence to our standards *as a system*, while they deny doctrines essential to the system, or hold doctrines at complete variance with the system.”²⁵

On the other hand, in seeking to preserve the full subscriptionist view, we must not require more than our strictest forefathers have. The kind of doctrinal errors that the Old

²¹ Hodge, *The Constitutional History*, in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 114.

²² Knight, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 127ff.

²³ *Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Form of Government [FG] 13.9).

²⁴ Knight, “Subscription”, 140ff.

²⁵ Morton H. Smith, *Subscription to the Westminster Standards in the Presbyterian Church in America*, n.d., 51.

School opposed in the view of subscription to which they objected in the 1834 “Act and Testimony” were Socinian, “Arminian and Pelagian heresies,”²⁶ matters of central importance to the system. Not every word, phrase, or even teaching must be either adhered to or even understood in order to hold to this orthodox view of subscription to our confessional Standards.

An overture from the Presbytery of Northern California in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was presented to the Sixtieth General Assembly in 1993 that proposed changes in the second ordination vow.²⁷ The Assembly sent it back because it lacked the required “grounds” and it has never reappeared.²⁸ It defines “system of doctrine” as “the whole body of truth which the Holy Scriptures teach. The Confession of Faith and Catechisms are to be received by the licentiate and officer as a most satisfactory exposition of this truth in an integral and indivisible whole. By receiving and adopting the standards, he thereby affirms and agrees with nothing less than the complete set of assertions contained in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms.” This is similar to, but not exactly, what Charles Hodge maintained was the original intention of the Adopting Act of 1729. Hodge emphasized the integrity of the system, not the “complete set of assertions.”

At this point I will summarize Charles Hodge’s treatment of this issue in *Church Polity*, “Adoption of the Confession of Faith” (317–35; this was formerly an article in the *Princeton Review* 1858, 669). Hodge distinguishes among three views of what the subscription vow commits a minister to when he declares that the Confession and Catechisms contain “the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.” He subscribes to: 1) the substance of doctrine; 2) every proposition; 3) the system of doctrine. A fourth distinction may be drawn from number 3.²⁹ By the “system of doctrine” Hodge understood *essential* doctrines, not every doctrine. The overture noted above would seem to indicate a fourth view: 4) every doctrine.

Hodge explores the implications of the criteria for vows and oaths—the historical meaning of the words and the *animus imponentis* (“the intention of the party imposing the oath”).³⁰ He concludes: “The Confession must be adopted in the sense of the Church, into the service of which the minister, in virtue of that adoption, is received.” Thus the intention of the church in its adoption of the confession, along with the history of its deliberations on exceptions must be taken into account.

Thus, Hodge concludes regarding view 1: “From the beginning, therefore, the mind of our Church has been that the ‘system of doctrine’ in its integrity, not the substance of those doctrines, was the term of ministerial communion. . . . the phrase ‘substance of doctrine’ has no definite assignable meaning.”³¹ On the other end of the spectrum view 2 “is contrary to the *animus imponentis*, or the mind of the Church.”³² The “words ‘system of doctrine,’ have a definite meaning, and serve to define and limit the extent to which the Confession is adopted.”³³ To require the adoption of every proposition or teaching is

²⁶ Ibid. Cf. the sixteen “Specifications of error in the Memorial,” 52–54.

²⁷ *Minutes of the Sixtieth General Assembly*, 81–83.

²⁸ John R. Muether, “Confidence in Our Brethren: Creedal Subscription in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 307.

²⁹ I owe this distinction to Dr. T. David Gordon.

³⁰ Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878), 319.

³¹ Ibid., 324.

³² Ibid., 327.

³³ Ibid., 326.

to invite hypocrisy and foster disunity. “We are not sure that we personally know a dozen ministers besides ourselves, who could stand the test.”³⁴ “Whenever a man is induced either to do what he does not approve, or to profess what he does not believe, his conscience is defiled. . . . It [the requirement of adopting every proposition] fosters a spirit of evasion and subterfuge.”³⁵

Hodge’s own position, view 3, varies from position 4 in that he does not believe that the “system of doctrine” requires subscription to every single doctrine taught in the confession. Hodge takes his cue from the original Adopting Act of 1729, which refers to the “essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine” and defines “scruples” as “only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government.”³⁶ Thus the “system” excludes articles not part of the “whole system in its integrity.”³⁷ Hodge is careful to distance himself from the view that *essential* refers only to the “doctrines of the gospel.”³⁸ *Essential* refers, rather, to the entire “system of doctrines common to the Reformed Churches.”³⁹ This includes all teachings on doctrine, worship, and government, which are *essential* to that system. There are three categories of such teachings: 1) those common to all Christians, expressed in the early councils of the ancient church; 2) those common to all Protestants, as distinct from Romanism; 3) those peculiar to Reformed Churches, as distinct from Lutheran and Arminian.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Hodge gives examples of doctrines not essential to the system, which are consistent with the kind of exceptions noted by the adopting assembly. These are doctrines “relating to civil magistrates, the power of the state, conditions of Church membership, marriage, divorce, and other matters lying outside of the ‘system of doctrine’ in its theological sense.”⁴¹ As important as the Confession’s teaching on these doctrines is, Hodge maintains, the Church has been wise not to make them conditions of ministerial communion.

Definition of Terms

Loose or “system subscription”⁴² – Affirms the essential doctrines of the “system of theology.” Not every doctrine taught in the Confession is included in this view.

Strict or “full subscription”⁴³ – Affirms every doctrine in the Confession and Catechisms; not every word or phrase, but every doctrine.

Scruple – literally *L. scrupulus*, small sharp stone, especially in a shoe, causing uneasiness, therefore, doubt based on conscientious reasons (qualms). The Assembly which produced the Adopting Act of 1729 defined “scruples” and how they should be dealt with:

³⁴ Ibid., 331.

³⁵ Ibid., 332.

³⁶ Ibid., 321.

³⁷ Ibid., 323.

³⁸ Ibid., 329.

³⁹ Ibid., 326.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 333.

⁴¹ Ibid., 334.

⁴² Smith, *Subscription to the Westminster Standards*, 3–4.

⁴³ Ibid., 2–3.

In case any minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall, at the time of his making the said declaration, declare his sentiments to the said Presbytery or Synod; who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be *only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government*.⁴⁴

While it can be demonstrated that the original intention regarding scruples was limited to certain teachings about the civil magistrate in his relationship to the church in chapters 20 and 23, it is also clear that from the beginning scruples have been understood to refer to a wider range of exceptions, due to the ambiguity of the original definition of scruples.⁴⁵ Debate over the extent to which exceptions are acceptable has continued ever since.

George Knight calls our attention, however, to the definition of scruple, in light of the afternoon declaration (which is the Adopting Act), which defined the scruples to which that Synod took exception, as well as the official clarifications of 1730 and 1736. “Essential and necessary articles and doctrines,” according to Knight, includes *every* article and doctrine in the Confession. Scruples were defined as “extra-essential and non-necessary points.” The only scruples allowed in 1729 were “some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters.” These non-essentials as well as “expressions” or modes of articulating articles or doctrines were the only categories of scruples accepted by the Synod as permissible in subscription.⁴⁶ Furthermore, this definition limited the matters on which Presbyteries and Synods could judge. According to Knight, they are not at liberty to decide which doctrines and articles are essential, since they are *all* essential as part of the system.

Hodge differed on this point in allowing other doctrines to be considered nonessential and unnecessary to the system. Whereas Knight would appear to consider “extra-essential and non-necessary points” to be limited to modes of expression of the doctrines of the Confession, Hodge took the example of clauses in chapters 20 and 23 concerning the civil magistrate as precedents for doctrinal exceptions not essential to the system as articulated in the other Reformed confessions. Clearly the clauses regarding the civil magistrate, to which many in the adopting assembly took exception, were more than mere modes of expression, but rather concerned specific doctrines about the role of the civil magistrate which the American church could not affirm. Our own John Murray took exception to the confessional doctrine of divorce and remarriage on the matter of remarriage in the case of abandonment.

Exception – As far as I can ascertain “exception” is synonymous with “scruple.”⁴⁷ Although in our Presbytery “exception” has been used as if it were more serious than a “scruple,”⁴⁸ there is no support for this distinction in the history of our churches. One

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11, from *Minutes of Synod*, 104. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁶ Knight, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 126.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Subscription to the Westminster Standards*. Smith simply uses the terms “scruple” and “exception” interchangeably throughout his paper.

⁴⁸ Email from The Rev. William Shishko (Sept. 1998) “An ‘exception,’ as I would understand it, is something you believe is either wrong or stated wrongly in the confession, i.e., it is something you disagree with. (Personally, I don’t believe a man should be able to teach his exception, e.g., I believe that proponents

deviation from this is found in the above mentioned overture to the Sixtieth General Assembly.⁴⁹ The overture defined an “exception” as

a dissent from, an objection to, or a mental reservation about *any assertion* contained in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms and is to be distinguished from an inconsequential objection to a proposition or from a quibble or from a reservation about terminology. However, such a distinction is to be made only by the judicatory, never by the individual. No officer or licentiate shall presume to have the right of making self-evaluation regarding this distinction.

An exception to the confessional standards may be granted by a judicatory, for the sake of conscience, only if 1) it affects a peripheral and minor assertion in the standards, not a central and fundamental one, 2) it does not vacate the central teaching of any chapter in the Confession or overturn a complete answer to any question in the Catechisms, and 3) it does not undermine the system of truth in the Confession and Catechisms as a whole.

Here the distinction is made among scruples in which an “exception” is a non-essential assertion, whereas “inconsequential objection” or “quibble” is an “expression” with which one disagrees. However confusing the terminology may be, the substance of a historical understanding of the intentions of the Adopting Act of 1729 are present in the overture. These are three: 1) no exceptions or scruples may be admitted if they undermine the complete set of assertions contained in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms, 2) there are two categories of exceptions or scruples: peripheral or minor assertions, and quibbles over terminology, 3) only the Presbytery may decide what is or is not a proper or admissible exception or scruple.

In light of the confusion over the terms scruple and exception I will use “exception/scruple.”

A Case in Point: Creation in Six Days

WCF 4.1 states: “It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of His eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days, and all very good.”

The phrase “in the space of six days” has raised the question of subscription in our presbytery. In subscribing to this paragraph of the Confession we must first ask: “What is required by the words of this paragraph?” The affirmation that: the Triune God, as the sole Creator, has freely created all things, visible and invisible, out of nothing (*ex nihilo*),

of the framework hypothesis need to declare an exception to the confession . . . and should not be able to teach that view). A ‘scruple’ is something that you have a conscience problem with, e.g., you have a scruple against being bound to teach a six day creation if—in fact—it is determined that is the actual meaning of the confession. Yes, you're probably right about that [that there is no distinction between “scruple” and “exception” in the history of this discussion]. More to the point is the question of whether a man is permitted to TEACH what he holds as scruple/exception.”

⁴⁹ *Minutes of the Sixtieth General Assembly*, 82. Emphasis added.

by a series of eight divine commands (*fiats*),⁵⁰ to display His own glory; the events of Genesis 1 and 2 were historical, in which Adam and Eve were uniquely created in God's image, at a specific point in time in a particular place (space-time history),⁵¹ all was created good, and under the Lordship of the Trinity.

The precise duration of the "six days" has never been agreed upon by orthodox Christians. It would seem unwise to focus on what is unclear, when so much else is at stake, and *is* clear. It would also seem unwise for anyone to be dogmatic, therefore about precisely what that duration is, whether from Kline's "Framework Hypothesis" perspective; the "Day-age Theory"; or from a literal twenty-four hour day or "Ordinary Day" perspective, provided the ordinand or minister can affirm what is summarized above. As far as I can determine all of those who have been ordained in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, who have held to the "Framework Hypothesis" or the "Day-age Theory," have affirmed the historicity of Genesis 1 and 2 and the special creation of Adam and Eve.

That no measure of such solar day existed until day four was observed by Augustine. Our own Dr. J. Gresham Machen observed:

The Book of Genesis seems to divide the work of creation into six successive steps or stages. It is certainly not necessary to think that the six days spoken of in the first chapter of the Bible are intended to be six days of twenty-four hours each. We may think of them rather as very long periods of time. But do they not at least mark six distinct acts or stages of creation, rather than merely six periods in which God molded by works of providence an already created world?⁵²

Machen goes on to assert: "The real question at issue here is the question whether at the origin of the race of mankind there was or was not a supernatural act of God."⁵³ It should be remembered that these quotations come from what was originally a series of radio lectures in which Machen sought to communicate clearly the most salient points of Reformed teaching to a popular audience. Someone might respond that Machen was not confronted by the onslaught of evolutionary unbelief which we face. I think that it can be shown historically that Machen was quite well aware of both evolutionary views and the threat that they posed to the church, as the larger context of the above quotes demonstrates.

In assessing the relative importance of the phrase "in the space of six days," it should be noted that in all of the Creeds of Christendom, including all of the Magisterial Reformation up until The Irish Articles of Religion in 1615, there is no mention of the *six days* or the duration of creation.⁵⁴ The emphasis is on the fact that the triune God created all things out of nothing. The Irish Articles appears to have been the precursor of the

⁵⁰ Dr. Joseph Pipa has suggested the following language in affirming creation *ex nihilo*: "eight fiat acts of ontological origination."

⁵¹ Dr. Joseph Pipa has suggested that macro-evolution be repudiated both within each of the days and in the creation of man.

⁵² J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (1937; repr., London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 115.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁴ This includes: The French Confession of Faith (1559); The Second Helvetic Confession (1566); The Heidelberg Catechism (1563); The Belgic Confession (1561); The First Scotch Confession (1560); and The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1563, 1571).

language “in the space of six days” in our Confession. In appreciating the relative weight of the doctrines of the Confession, as opposed to every proposition by which those doctrines are expressed, Professor John Murray observed: “It seems to the present writer that to demand acceptance of every proposition in so extensive a series of documents [as the Westminster Confession and Catechisms] would be incompatible with the avowal made in answer to the first question to the formula of subscription and comes dangerously close to the error of placing human documents on a par with holy Scripture.”⁵⁵

Strict or full subscriptionists have always allowed minor exceptions, which are as Samuel Miller explained “of little or no importance, and interfered with no article of faith.”⁵⁶ Morton Smith, another strict subscriptionist, opines, “The ordinand, who takes exception to a particular teaching of the Confession or Catechisms, may be ordained by the Presbytery, if it feels that the exception does not impinge upon the basic system of doctrine contained in the Standards. If one is not able thus to subject himself to the brethren, he should seek some other communion, where he has greater liberty.”⁵⁷ The various understandings of the duration of the days of creation has never been understood to impinge on the essential doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. One may fully affirm the statement that God “created all things of nothing, in the space of six days, and all very good” without committing oneself to a particular interpretation of the length of those days. That there was a definite beginning and ending to God’s creative acts, and that those acts were by divine command (*fiat*) and not by providential development, as Machen points out, is required by the statement. That each day was of a particular length is not.

While I believe that the intention of those who adhere to the twenty-four hour day, or “Ordinary Day” view (among whom I count myself) is to preserve the integrity of the doctrine of creation, I think it unwise to make this interpretation of the duration of the six days a confessional requirement. It is not in the best interests of the preservation of orthodoxy to speak dogmatically where the meaning of Scripture is not crystal clear. Nor do we need to explain everything in order to affirm the essential doctrines of our Confession, e.g., the Trinity.

On the other hand, I believe that if we affirm the duration of the “six days” to be open to a variety of legitimate Reformed interpretations, we should insist that those views may be presented but not taught as the final word on this subject in the church. Dr. Joseph Pipa, who cogently defends the “Ordinary Day” view of Genesis 1 and 2, and who has significant exegetical concerns with the “Framework Hypothesis,” has suggested the “Framework Hypothesis” be allowed as an exception as long as those who take the exception can affirm that in Genesis 1 and 2 there are eight fiat acts of ontological origination; and deny macro-evolution within the days and in the creation of Adam and Eve. The writer of Hebrews (11:3) gives a terse summary of our faith at this point: “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.”

⁵⁵ Murray in Smith, *Subscription*, 80.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Subscription*, 34.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

Conclusions

1. The original “preliminary” act along with the Adopting Act of 1729, in light of its subsequent elucidation in 1730 and 1736, intends a full subscription to the entire system of doctrine articulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.
2. While misunderstandings and later perversions of this intention may have led to a loose or “substance” view of subscription, the “system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures” refers to the whole body of articles and doctrines in its integrity as a system, expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. Candidates and ministers must affirm that all the articles of the system taught in the Confession are essential and necessary.
3. Exceptions/scruples are only admissible if they concern non-essential doctrines, “propositions,” phrases, or words. Non-essential refers to articles, “propositions,” phrases, or words which do not alter our understanding of the articles and doctrines essential to the system expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.
4. Presbyteries have authority to decide the admissibility of exceptions/scruples only within the limits of non-essential articles, “propositions,” phrases, or words in accordance with the historical decisions of the courts of the church.

Appendix A - The Adopting Act of 1729

Approved at the morning session, September 19, 1729

Although the Synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men’s consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with, and abhorrence of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the Church, being willing to receive one another as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances, all such as have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the kingdom of heaven, yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity; and do therefore agree that all ministers of this Synod, or that hereafter shall be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in, and approbation of, the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith. And we do also agree, that all the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate of the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession, either by subscribing the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms, or by a verbal declaration of their assent thereto, as such minister or candidate shall think best. And in case any minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to

be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government. But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable of communion with them. And the Synod do solemnly agree, that none of us will traduce or use any opprobrious terms of those who differ from us in these extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrine, but treat them with the same friendship, kindness, and brotherly love, as if they had not differed from us in such sentiments.⁵⁸

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⁵⁸ James Payton Jr., "Background and Significance of the Adopting Act of 1729," in Dennison and Gamble, *Pressing toward the Mark*, 136–37.

ServantReading

Reading the Puritans and *A Puritan Theology*

by William B. Kessler

A Puritan Theology, by Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, v + 1054

No matter how dark the night, the lamp of the Puritans remains bright, providing a beacon, shining down through the ages, even for our generation. The Puritans, heirs of the spiritualist communities of the Renaissance, animated by the spirit of Christian humanism, employing and building upon the vibrant theology of the Reformation, striving to reform church and nation, spending and being spent for Christ and his church, are part of our godly heritage. Truly, they are our fathers in the faith. Who, among us, is not familiar with some of the names of those stellar divines: William Ames, William Perkins, Richard Sibbes, Richard Baxter, Thomas Goodwin, Thomas Manton, John Flavel, John Bunyan, and John Owen? And who, among us, has not read their works with profit and delight: *The Bruised Reed and the Smoking Flax*; *The Plague of Plagues*; *the Mortification of Sin*; *The Art of Propheying*; *A Glimpse of Zion's Glory*; *The Glory of Christ*; *The Fountain of Life Opened*? The Puritans, bright lights, indeed.

Joel Beeke and Mark Jones have rendered rich service to the church in writing *A Puritan Theology*. The book is a summary of what the Puritans taught and preached; it is organized systematically, using the standard theological loci. There are nine main sections beginning with Prolegomena and continuing with Theology Proper, Anthropology and Covenant Theology, Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, Eschatology, and Theology in Practice, with an afterword. This is a big book; 977 pages of text; over 1000 pages with works cited and index. The works cited covers forty-five pages; authors beginning with Thomas Adams and ending with Ulrich Zwingli are listed. I was impressed (really overwhelmed) with the amount of information given in the footnotes, information drawn from both classical works of the Reformation, including the Puritans themselves, and modern scholars, including many doctoral dissertations. Containing a wealth of scholarly observation and insight, clearly summarizing what the best of the Puritans wrote, addressing, to some degree, contemporary issues in theology, and giving, along the way (in faithful Puritan fashion), exhortations, admonitions, and applications, the book is a treasure chest filled with precious gems and rare jewels.

I have mentioned being overwhelmed when reading *A Puritan Theology*, not with the content of the book (which I found enriching) but with the feeling that there is a large, ongoing, scholarly discussion to which I have not been privy and in which I have little time to be involved. In our time, there has been much written about the Puritans (again, check out the footnotes), and, naturally, there have been various debates, issues, and disagreements that have arisen (i.e., the Calvin versus Calvinists controversy; the nature, influence, and benefit of scholasticism; the influence of Erasmus, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and the Zurich Reformers; the Calvinistic convictions with the recognition of the authority of the Bible

among the Anglicans, etc.). For most fulltime pastors, it would be extremely difficult to devote the time necessary to be part of that scholarly conversation (another reason to be impressed with Beeke and Jones, both of whom are pastors). However, the “subtext” of the book (i.e., the assumptions underlying various debated issues discussed today) should not distract the reader from being informed and finding profit and delight by reading *A Puritan Theology*. And, there may be those assumptions and issues that may prove to be a fruitful vein of study for the pastor taking a study leave.

But there is another concern, a major concern, I would like to address, and that is the problem of historical context. I would like to divide the problem of history and historical context into two parts: the first part raises questions about the historical context of the Puritans themselves; and the second part raises questions about the historical context of Beeke and Jones’s book itself. In other words, the problem, as I see it, can come down to two questions: How do we read the Puritans? and, How do we read *A Puritan Theology*?

The danger in not raising these questions is to think that Puritan theology has simply fallen out of heaven and has become the standard of theology and life (I recognize that putting it this way is an overstatement, but hopefully it makes the point clear). A danger in reading the Puritans is to approach them with a “halo hermeneutic” in which theology before and, to some extent after, is deficient—the Puritans had it right, everyone else has it wrong, to a greater or lesser degree. Granted, there is a danger of judging the Puritans negatively on the basis of theological or intellectual perspectives which are valid today. Carl Trueman explains the danger of misreading past historical actions in this way:

One of the greatest temptations for historians, particularly perhaps for historians studying the history of ideas, is to impose on the past, ideas, categories, or values that were simply nonexistent or that did not have the same function or significance during the times studied. The roots of the problem are obvious: we live in the present; the objects of historical study relate to the past; and as L. P. Hartley famously quipped at the beginning of *The Go-Between*, ‘The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.’¹

In part, Beeke and Jones’s purpose is to defend the witness of the Puritans from a misreading that would criticize the Puritans by a contemporary imposition. But can a misreading of the Puritans work the other way, reading the Puritans as a witness that supports the ideals and values of our contemporary authors, disregarding the distance between the Puritans and ourselves, and entertaining a more reminiscent and romantic idealization of the past, resulting in a skewed judgment of the present?

The historical context of the Puritans, which gives shape to their concerns, thoughts, writing, and lives, is complex. Consider the theological influences that were not so neatly categorized for them: John Calvin’s writings and reform; the Geneva Bible; the early place of William Tyndale, John Frith, and John Bale in developing ideas that were peculiarly English, and Puritan; Heinrich Bullinger’s influence (who had the highest reputation in England at the time of Henry VI); Martin Bucer’s influence (who spent two years in England at the end of his life and whose influential work *De Regno Christi* was dedicated to Edward VI); the place of Thomistic theology with a strong biblicistic conviction; not to mention the strong moralistic, anti-ceremonial, anti-clerical convictions that were voiced by spiritualist movements in the church beginning at, or possibly earlier than, the Renaissance; the

¹ Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 109.

Lollards; the typological, Christocentric (for some), or universal/political (for others), interpretation of the Old Testament; the logic of Peter Ramus; humanism with its rediscovering of ancient culture, its new convictions and tools for education, and its strong emphasis on moral behavior, etc. Consider the burdens these Puritans bore: bubonic plagues, and otherwise high mortality rates of their wives, children, and themselves, the London fire, revolutions, civil wars, persecutions, imprisonments, the fear of Roman Catholicism's winning the day in England, and the burden they had for the nation and the church, with no separation of church and state, their ministry bearing the weight of national responsibilities. Since a strong secular humanist ethos in England did not exist as yet (as in our day), and since religion was not yet being defined as a separate compartment of life (although enlightenment challenges were on the horizon which have born bitter fruit for us), and since the modern nation-state was unheard of, this was a culture that took the ministry seriously as a central component in all the spheres of life. How does all this shape the Puritans' understanding of Scripture and theology? We have arrived in a "foreign country" where things are done differently.

Though reading *A Puritan Theology* with profit and delight, I find I am reading in page after page, chapter after chapter, and section after section, a fairly detailed summary of what some of the Puritans have written, with some discussion of current issues, but with little historical analysis. This book is a great summary of what the Puritans wrote, a great resource in citing the scholarship being done, with ample exhortations to the reader; but it can read like an encyclopedia. It is interesting to note that the book's form is like a systematic theology, yet the authors mention throughout that the Puritan writings come mostly in sermonic form. How does this observation change the way the Puritans are understood? How did the various influences upon them shape their theology and life? Beeke and Jones do not answer these questions. Is there a danger, then, of thinking we really understand the Puritans when all we have is a detailed summary organized systematically? Is there not a further danger of making simplistic parallels between the Puritans and ourselves? A more difficult question to wrestle with is this: Can you synthesize in a historically meaningful way the writings of the Puritans in a book like this?

The second issue I would like to address is the context of Beeke and Jones's book itself. One of their aims in writing the book was to show an overall consensus among the Puritans. To demonstrate unity of Puritan thought was a primary objective (5–6) (But can it be more fruitful understanding where the disunity lies?). They also desired to write "responsible, historical theology" (6). For them doing historical theology is giving, "an accurate picture of what the Puritans said" (6). Is this really doing historical theology? They concede some weaknesses in Puritan theology, using as an example Thomas Goodwin's eschatology. They admit that while Puritans did not excel in eschatology, "Reformed theologians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have provided the church with a more exegetically sustainable account of how to understand, for example, the book of Revelation" (6). But does not eschatology today cover far more than accounting for the book of Revelation, specifically, seeing eschatology as a basic structure for the entire New Testament? Their purpose, however, is to vindicate the Puritans as theologians and honor them as faithful pastors:

We believe that the Puritans were not only correct but that they excel in most areas of theology. Few theologians prior to the Puritans could write with such theological

precision while also applying theology to the hearts and minds of those who listened to their sermons and read their books. (6)

Is this evaluation overly hagiographic?

But a further aim, and it seems a primary aim, is to apply Puritan theology and spirituality to the churches today. The concluding eight chapters show “a variety of ways in which the Puritans put their theology into practice” (7). There is a strong emphasis from beginning to end to “emulate Puritan spirituality” (971). One of the authors calls us to self-examination, attempting to penetrate the conscience, with a barrage of questions.

Let us ask ourselves questions like these: Are we, like the Puritans, thirsting to glorify the triune God? Are we motivated by biblical truth and biblical fire? Do we share the Puritan view of the vital necessity of conversion and of being clothed with the righteousness of Christ? It is not enough to just read the Puritans. A stirring interest in the Puritans is not the same thing as a revival of Puritanism. We need the inward disposition of the Puritans—the authentic, biblical, intelligent piety they showed in our hearts, lives, and churches.

Will you live godly in Christ Jesus like the Puritans? Will you go beyond studying their theology, discussing their ideas, recalling their achievements, and berating their failures? Will you practice the degree of obedience to God’s Word for which they strove? Will you serve God as they served Him? Will you live with one eye on eternity as they did? (971)

If that inquiry was not challenging enough, immediately following is the section entitled “Afterword” with Chapter 60 entitled “A Final Word.” Describing the difficult conditions the Puritans had to live through, the final word “is really a reflection upon the various strengths of Puritan theologians that should characterize today’s theologians and ministers in the church” (977). And so the Puritans are described as committed to the great truths as preachers, pastors, and theologians; well-educated men who had a deep knowledge of the Scriptures; and men motivated “to reform the church in the direction of true godliness and practical righteousness” (975–76). This emphasis is consistent with the full title of the book, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*.

Clearly, the writers have a burden for the spiritual well-being of the present church. Using the Puritans’ writings (their writings being mostly sermonic material for their sixteenth- and seventeenth- century congregations), and presenting Puritan theology and life as a rule, Beeke and Jones judge the contemporary church as wanting. Furthermore, according to Beeke and Jones, the church’s hope is found in conformity to the Puritan norm. Though sympathetic with their concerns for the church’s faith and life, I would question whether “asking for the old paths” (971, quoting from Jeremiah 6:16, the “old paths” referring to the Puritans) can serve as the remedy for the church’s ills. Are the Puritans and their writings essential to our ministering effectively in the church? I believe they are; we need to study the Puritans’ writings if we would be knowledgeable and effective ministers on behalf of Christ. Historical theology is important. But simply evaluating and applying the Puritans as a rule of faith and life would be counterproductive. By becoming so “Puritan” our ability to communicate and relate to our time, our community, our people will be stunted, provincial, stilted. We must recognize that we no longer live in the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries. Our concerns and burdens, though similar in many ways to the Puritans' concerns and burdens, are also radically different from theirs.

Geerhardus Vos, in a review article covering Herman Bavinck's first volume of systematic theology, published in 1895, describes advancements made by Abraham Kuyper and Bavinck as having a historic sense, which is keeping continuity with the old Calvinism without merely reproducing seventeenth century theology, and in shaping Reformed theology to communicate to their present age. Vos writes:

In the first place it [the advancing movement] has displayed a high degree of historic sense. The break in the theological history of Calvinism was keenly felt, and it was recognized that only historical study could restore the continuity. In the second place this historical enthusiasm for the old Calvinism did not blind men to the fact that with a mere reproduction of the seventeenth century theology little would be gained. There has been a conscious effort to develop further the Calvinistic principles and to shape the Reformed dogma to a form suitable and congenial to the consciousness of the present age.²

Beeke and Jones serve us well in keeping our continuity with the Puritans. However, are they advocating a reproduction of seventeenth theology and life? If so, little is gained.

Nowhere is the expression of theology and life more relevant than in preaching. Preaching, as a means of grace, is central to the life and health of the church. If the church is in a deplorable state, preaching will be a primary means of addressing the sick and sad problems within the church. Beeke and Jones believe that "no group of preachers in church history has matched their [the Puritans'] comprehensively and powerfully biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical preaching" (681). They call upon us to emulate the Puritans in their love for preaching: "If we could cultivate half of the love for preaching that the Puritan preachers had, the church would soon know better days" (682). The church has become anti-intellectual:

The Puritans understood that a mindless Christianity fosters a spineless Christianity. An anti-intellectual gospel spawns an irrelevant gospel that does not get beyond felt needs. We fear that is happening in our churches today: we have lost our intellectual understanding of faith, and for the most part we don't see the necessity of recovering it. We do not understand that when we are no different from non-Christians in what we think and believe, we will soon be no different from unbelievers in how we live. (687–88)

Furthermore, the conscience needs to be confronted, which was an essential task for the Puritans but is neglected today, "Today, many preachers are reticent to confront the conscience. We need to learn from the Puritans that a friend who loves you most will tell you the most truth about yourself" (688). But a follow-up concern needs to be raised which is relevant for our discussion with Beeke and Jones; not only do we need a friend to tell us the truth about ourselves, but we need a friend who is humble, discerning, and gracious in telling us the truth about ourselves. So for preachers preaching to the conscience, care must be taken not only in what they preach but in how they preach.

² Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 475.

In the history of preaching, the Puritans are master preachers; we need to study them and learn from them. But care needs to be taken in emulating Puritan preachers, lest we become dramatically and oddly dressed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century garb while walking down twenty-first-century streets. We will gain attention but not a hearing. William Still, in his *The Work of the Pastor*, commenting upon contemporary ministers, says:

It is striking that we find far more preachers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than in the first. But whether our one scholarly foot is in the first or sixteenth century AD, or the sixth or tenth century BC, our other dynamical foot must be firmly planted in our own day.³

He continues:

Perhaps your temptation is not to live in the sixteenth century, or in the world of its discoveries or impacts: you prefer the seventeenth century. It may be that even now you are in the process of absorbing not only the solid teaching of Puritan writers, and therefore acquiring the stable character those teachings inculcate. But you may be seeing the Word of God through their eyes in such a way that you are really living three hundred years ago, and have acquired a detachment from the present day, and even a cold disdainful attitude toward it that makes you excessively unattractive and forbidding. What a pity.⁴

Admittedly, on the one hand, there is a danger of dismissing historical sense which loses the essential continuity with the Puritans. But, on the other hand, there can be a romantic, irresponsible adoption of Puritan preaching that distracts, or worse, results in the disdain of our own generation, exhibiting an ugly self-righteousness. We need the Puritans to give us insight into how good preachers ministered to their congregations in their age with their concerns so that we might minister to our own congregations in our own age with our own concerns.

And so the Puritans burn on, shining brightly for our generation. We are not called to stare into their light, a burning, splendid, light. But we are called to use their light, illuminating our own work and age. Learning what it takes to minister God's Word faithfully; being committed to uncompromising biblical orthodoxy; adopting language that addresses the hearts and consciences of our people, and our generation; sacrificing in spending and being spent for the sake of the gospel, in our time; understanding the unique season and spirit God has ordered for this time and place; advancing his rule and reign through the church—these all call us to prudent communion with our fathers, the Puritans.

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³ William Still, *The Work of the Pastor* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scot: Christian Focus, 2010), 64.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

ServantReading

Center Church

by Timothy Keller

by Shane Lems

Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City, by Timothy Keller. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012, 400 pages, \$29.99, hardcover.

For various reasons a book like this is difficult for me to review. It is difficult to review because it's a long and very detailed book that covers numerous topics. I would need many pages to give a thorough review. It is also difficult for me to review because there are so many helpful parts of it that I would like to explain in depth; but there are also a few parts of it that I would like to critique from a confessional Presbyterian point of view. That being said, I hope this brief review will stimulate readers enough to consider reading this helpful resource on church planting and, in the good sense of the term, church growth.

Center Church has three main sections: 1) Gospel, 2) City, and 3) Movement. In the first section, Keller spends around seventy pages explaining the gospel of grace. He doesn't give a detailed exegetical explanation of the gospel, but he does explain how the gospel is rich, counterintuitive, and affects every area of our lives. In the first section Keller also talks about gospel renewal, which is something like revival.

The second section of the book, City, contains 160 pages discussing these three topics: contextualization, focus on the city, and cultural engagement. Keller argues that there are poor and unbiblical ways of contextualization—but there are also good and biblical ways to contextualize the gospel. Very obviously, *Center Church* is mostly about churches and church plants in large cities. Keller spends time in this section talking about the biblical theme of “city” and also discusses it from a sociological point of view. Finally, in this second section of the book, Keller talks about the different views of Christ and culture and ends up attempting to utilize the strength of each “Christ/culture” view. Keller's cultural vision is what he calls “cultural renewal.”

The third section of *Center Church*, Movement, is a 130-page explanation of what it means to be a missional church having an integrative ministry that is more of a movement than an institution. Keller spends time defining a missional church (even giving “marks” of a missional church). He also talks about how people relate to each other in church and out of church—including how a missional church should interact with non-Christians during the week. Here he advocates an “every-member gospel ministry” that has to do with evangelism and mercy ministry. What should “missional” worship look like? Keller answers that question in this final section and also explains justice and mercy in the city. Finally, he says that though “Center Churches” should not throw out the institutional model of ministry, they should be closer to the “movement” model of ministry, which includes following a vision for the church and city.

To be sure, this book isn't technically a manual for church planting. It is all about church planting, but 1) it is a "big picture" view of church planting from a theological, philosophical, and sociological angle, and 2) it doesn't give a detailed step-by-step time line or "how to" of church planting. Also, the reader should note that the book is not about a church planter's piety and life. Yes, it will help church planters, but it isn't a book about church planters.

So what are the strengths of this book? Many! This book was one of the most thought-provoking books on ministry and church planting that I've ever read. I'd suggest reading it with a notebook and highlighter handy so you can highlight and write the insights that apply to your own ministry, evangelism, and church planting. I appreciated Keller's interaction with an unbeliever's mindset and how we can engage them in a way that is biblically relevant. I was also motivated to think about healthy outreach at a local level that includes the members of the church. I'm glad Keller got me thinking again about contextualization and how we should be careful not to let our traditions become idols in our ministry.

There is such a thing as a good, godly interaction of church and culture, or the Christian and culture. I certainly need motivation to be a good neighbor and let the light of Christ shine in every area of my life. This book pushes the reader in that direction. I was also glad to be reminded that we should not let the church as institution swallow the church as organism. I have more good things to say about this book, but, suffice it to say, *Center Church* is on my "top five" list of church ministry/planting books.

Yet there are some significant weaknesses of *Center Church*. To me, it felt like Keller was writing from a conservative evangelical perspective to conservative evangelicals—the book is neither distinctly Presbyterian nor confessionally grounded. On a different note, Keller did explain the gospel clearly and well, and the book is grace-centered. However, he used the term "gospel" as an adjective so many times I was uncomfortable with it by the end of the book. For example, Keller talks about gospel neighboring, gospel renewal, gospel contextualization, gospel movement, and so forth. Using "gospel" as an adjective sounds good, but often is ambiguous and therefore not overly helpful.

I was also troubled by Keller's triperspectival and flexible views of the regulative principle of worship. Many readers who subscribe to the Westminster Standards will disagree with Keller when he makes the elements of worship and church polity part of "ministry expression" rather than part of the philosophy of ministry or doctrinal foundation. In other words, Keller's views on church polity and worship are not in line with Old School Presbyterianism. I also had some questions about Keller's model of church polity which seems at first glance to be a sort of hybrid Presbyterian model.

As I noted above, Keller's main emphasis is on the city. This book is so focused on the city that big portions of it don't really apply to churches in small cities and towns. I do certainly believe that we need to be planting churches in big cities—but in doing so we should not avoid or downplay rural areas that also need solid churches. On the topic of city, I would also hesitate to adopt Keller's "cultural renewal" model. Some points he made about cultural renewal were actually quite good, but I thought he spent too much time with the "Christ/culture" debate.

More could be said about this helpful book on church planting and church renewal. I certainly recommend it for those who need a good resource on these topics. But it is not for everyone. The book is thick, detailed, and printed on large pages with small font and

even smaller endnotes. You'll need time, concentration, and dedication to work through the entire book. But for me it was definitely worth it; even the disagreements I had with parts of it made me think more about these crucial issues. In fact, though I don't think it is "the" church planter's book, the one that will end all others, I do think it should be on the shelves of pastors, church planters, elders, and informed laypeople who are involved in Christian ministry and church planting.

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ServantReading

A Personal Appreciation of D.A. Macfarlane by J. Cameron Fraser

by Gregory E. Reynolds

A Personal Appreciation of D.A. Macfarlane, by J. Cameron Fraser. Belleville, Ontario: Guardian, 2013, 62 pages, \$8.50.

Similar to Cameron Fraser's *Thandabantu: The Man Who Loved the People*, *A Personal Appreciation of D.A. Macfarlane* is a supplement to the fuller (147 pages) biographical material, *I Shall Arise: The Life and Ministry of Donald A. MacFarlane* (Aberdeen: Faro Press, 1984), edited by John Tallach.

J. Cameron Fraser is a Westminster Theological Seminary graduate (1978), and served as the last editor of *The Presbyterian Guardian* (1978-80), which served a largely OPC constituency prior to the beginning of *New Horizons* as a denominational magazine. Fraser was until recently the pastor of First Christian Reformed Church, Lethbridge, Alberta. Macfarlane was Fraser's uncle by marriage to his mother's sister Ella, but what makes the account more personal is that Fraser lived with him after his mother, Christina nee Finlayson, died in 1961 when Fraser was six. Fraser's father, James, had been a missionary in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), sent by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1938. He died in 1959. Their missionary labors are chronicled in the biography by Alexander McPherson, *James Fraser: A Record of Missionary Endeavor in Rhodesia in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967).

While the era in which Macfarlane ministered—he was ordained in 1914—is very distant, and thus different, from ours, his life and ministry should be a great encouragement since we all live in the larger New Covenant era in which the New Testament was written, and into which the gospel of Jesus Christ has intruded with sublime power.

Fraser's tale tells us of a man of superior intelligence and a fine education who served his Lord faithfully in humble local ministry, eschewing the fame and fortune he might have achieved had he been chosen for another calling (43), or had he been born into a wealthier family. As his ministerial mentor J.R. Mackay remarked, "Mr. Macfarlane has such a capacious mind that you can pour all you have into it and it will hold it all—and more!" (15). While not esteemed in the world's eyes, Pastor Macfarlane was appointed tutor of Greek and Hebrew by the Free Presbyterian Synod in 1932 (42). He upheld the need for rigorous academic ministerial training throughout his ministry.

His first call was to serve the congregations of Lairg and Bonar, Dornoch and Rogart, north of Inverness in the Northwest Highlands. In 1921, he accepted a call to nearby Oban, and finally in 1930 to the joint congregation of Dingwall and Beaully, just outside of Inverness (15). He retired in 1973 after 59 years of ministry.

Macfarlane's steadfastness is made all the more remarkable considering his lifelong struggle with depression. After a nervous breakdown in his second pastorate, he found relief during his convalescence from a page in John Owen's commentary on Psalm 130. Owen comments on verse 4, "But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared," in which he is dealing with "objections to believing from the power of sin." Macfarlane tore out the page that encouraged him and carried it with him for years afterward. After the death of his first wife, many years later, he suffered another breakdown (17). His recovery reminds us that it was God's grace and presence in his life that enabled him to endure such hardship. Such examples serve to encourage us in our own dark hours.

Among Macfarlane's imitable attributes was his exemplary faithfulness to his denomination (24). Another was his gentleness, especially with those with whom he disagreed (25). From the effect of his preaching to instances of his pastoral kindness, Macfarlane leaves a deep impression on the reader, and sets a wonderful example for ministers of the Word. Throughout Fraser's narrative, the personal influence of his uncle on his own ministerial development is instructive and touching. He recalls, "My own recollection of his preaching has more to do with the heavenly atmosphere he brought to the pulpit than the actual content of the sermons. He was deeply conscious of being in the presence of God and communicated that awareness to his hearers" (37). The black and white photographs add to the interest of Fraser's fine story. The appearances of Edmund Clowney (24) and John Murray (42) in the story add to its interest for OPC officers. I reviewed Fraser's *Thandabantu* in *Ordained Servant Online* in December 2010,¹ an appreciation based on Alexander McPherson, *James Fraser: A Record of Missionary Endeavor in Rhodesia in the Twentieth Century* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1967).

While Macfarlane was well known in his small area of the world, he is a fine example of the most important kind of Christian leader—the ordinary, everyday pastor of a local church. We need more biographies of similar ministers in our more recent history, and even more examples. God often calls extraordinary men to ordinary ministry.

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¹ http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=229&issue_id=60; *Ordained Servant* 19 (2010): 114.

ServantPoetry

George Herbert (1593–1633)

Conscience

Peace prattler, do not lour:
Not a fair look, but thou dost call it foul:
Not a sweet dish, but thou dost call it sour:
 Music to thee doth howl.
By listning to thy chatting fears
I have both lost mine eyes and ears.

Prattler, no more, I say:
My thoughts must work, but like a noiseless sphere;
Harmonious peace must rock them all the day:
 No room for prattlers there.
If thou persistest, I will tell thee,
That I have physic to expel thee.

And the receipt shall be
My Saviour's blood: when ever at his board
I do but taste it, straight it cleanseth me,
 And leaves thee not a word;
No, not a tooth or nail to scratch,
And at my actions carp, or catch.

Yet if thou talkest still,
Besides my physic, know there's some for thee:
Some wood and nails to make a staff or bill
 For those that trouble me:
The bloody cross of my dear Lord
Is both my physic and my sword.