

### Series Introduction

“Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?” This the third ordination vow asked of elders in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). It is incredibly significant for the EPC because it represents the doctrinal unity of our church: we affirm and commit to following the Westminster Confession and Catechisms in both our personal beliefs and ministerial practice, because the Westminster Standards contain the system of doctrine taught in the Bible.

This vow unites us as ministers of the gospel since we all affirm a united understanding of scripture’s teaching for faith and practice. This places the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC), and Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) in a uniquely privileged and critical role in the life of our church. We believe that they are comprehensive, accurate, and faithful summaries of the Bible’s system of doctrine. “The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.” (WLC 3). This vow is intended to be a sincere agreement that our Confession and Catechisms are faithful teachings of God’s word, and therefore contain the system of doctrine that is to be the rule of faith and life for all people. What unites us theologically is this sincere affirmation of, and submission to, the Confession’s and Catechisms’ faithfulness in presenting God’s rule of faith and obedience.

The EPC has made some distinctive modifications to the Confession and Catechisms, both in their form and their role. Some of these modifications have been direct and explicit, some indirect and perhaps even unintentional. The particular positioning of our confessional system within our church affects the meaning of our ordination vows, as well as what the rule of faith and life actually means in belief and practice. The contention of the following series is that these distinctive positionings of our confessional system has weakened our church’s doctrine, and that there is a better direction to take confessionally. Furthermore, these distinctive positionings are unique within global, confessional Presbyterianism, and this uniqueness has alienated the EPC confessionally from our sister churches.

The aim of this call is to begin confessional renewal and resourcement. The desire is that this series will prompt meaningful conversation in the EPC over the role of the Confession and Catechisms, conversation that will lead to action and revision. Since as elders of the EPC we have previously given our sincere word that we affirm and receive the WCF, WLC, and WSC, we already affirm their importance. The Confession and Catechisms of our church are serious, and should be the primary theological framework for the lives of our congregations and our ministerial practice. Discussions about their role that attempt to take them seriously, even in areas often deemed unimportant, should in turn, be taken seriously. While the fact that a conversation has begun about our confessional system does not make the conversation itself important, my hope is that the quality of the analysis will persuade elders of our church that this conversation is worthwhile.

### Summary of Part I: Repairing the Confession

The WCF and WLC have seen significant revisions in the history of American Presbyterianism. Some of these revisions have been held by all the American branches of Presbyterianism for centuries. Others have had limited acceptance, or are entirely unique to the EPC either in

expectation of ministerial subscription or amendments entirely exclusive to our church. Since our confessional system matters as the source of theological unity for our church, these revisions, no matter how apparently inconsequential, are worth reconsidering. The argument I will make in this section is that the majority of the revisions since 1903 have been ill-conceived and should be reversed.

### Table of Contents

Series Introduction ...	...1
Part I Summary ...	...1
History of Confessional Amendments ...	...3
General Note ...	...8
The Imposition of Oaths by Lawful Authority ...	...12
Divorce and Remarriage ...	...15
The Pope and the Head of the Church ...	...26
Persons Authorized to Administrate the Sacraments ...	...30
Chapters 34 & 35 ...	...39
Part I Conclusion ...	...42
Appendix I (ARP Report on WCF Chapters 34 and 35) ...	...43

History of Substantial Amendments to the WCF and WLC

Section	Kind of Amendment	Year	Churches with this Amendment
Original	None.	1647	Church of Scotland (CoS), Free Church of Scotland (FCoS), Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). <sup>1</sup>
WCF 20.4 (Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience)	<u>Deleted a clause.</u> The original clause allowed for Christians to be summoned before civil governments for holding or propagating non-scriptural views that harmed society. The ARP revised this in 1799 to say that individuals may be summoned before civil governments for these violations insofar as the propagating or holding of these views or practices actually did hurt society.	1788	1788: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA) <sup>2</sup> , Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO). 1799: Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP).
WCF 23.3 (Of the Civil Magistrate)	<u>Rewrote entirely.</u> The 1647 version stated that civil government possessed the responsibility to ensure doctrinal purity in the church and society, and may summon synods of the church to address issues. The 1788 revision limited civil government's role to maintaining a society where the freedom and flourishing of the church was maintained. The ARP revised the original version in 1799 in a different direction, calling on governments to	1788	1788: PCUSA, OPC, PCA, EPC, ECO. 1799: ARP.

<sup>1</sup> While the RPCNA maintains the original 1647 Confession, they have adopted a 'Reformed Presbyterian Testimony' of their faith as a formal commentary on the WCF which contradicts it on several points. The RPCNA in effect holds to the 1788 version of the WCF, though they formally maintain the 1647 version of the Confession.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout, both the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (1789-1958, when it merged with the United Presbyterian in North America [UPCNA] to become to United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America [UPCUSA]) and currently existing Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (1983-present, formed from the merger of the UPCUSA and the Presbyterian Church in the United States [PCUS]) are abbreviated as PCUSA for simplicity.

	govern in a manner subject to God's revelation.		
WCF 31.2 (Of Synods and Councils)	<u>Entirely deleted.</u> The 1647 version stated that civil governments had the right to call synods of the church and depose of ministers who were acting unlawfully. The ARP revised the 1647 version in 1799 to affirm that only the church may depose of its ministers, but acknowledges that the government may call a synod of the church. <sup>3</sup>	1788	1788: PCUSA, OPC, PCA, EPC, ECO. 1799: ARP.
WLC 109: What sins are forbidden in the second commandment?	<u>Deleted a clause</u> that identified tolerating a false religion as prohibited by the second commandment.	1788	PCUSA, OPC, PCA, EPC, ECO.
WCF 24.3 (Of Marriage and Divorce)	<u>Deleted a single sentence</u> forbidding remarriage in the case of, "The man may not marry any of his wife's kindred, nearer in blood than he may of his own: nor the woman of her husband's kindred, nearer in blood than of her own."	1887 <sup>4</sup>	OPC, PCA.
WCF 16.7 (Of Good Works)	<u>Revised the entire paragraph.</u> The original stated that good works done by sinful men could be beneficial, and that it was better for	1903	PCUSA, ECO. <sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> My personal convictions are closer to the 1647 and 1799 versions of the WCF on 20.4, 23.3, and 32.1, rather than the 1788 version held by the EPC. The 1788 version does not explicitly contradict the 1647 and 1799 version, it just does not specifically hold them, which means someone who agrees with either 1647 or 1799 may faithfully subscribe to 1788. It is unfortunate that the 'Afterward on the Texts' in the EPC's official version of the WCF states, "The original Confession of 1647 allows some secular authority over and interference in church affairs" in reference to these amendments. To the modern reader the term 'secular' implies religiously or morally neutral, or functional civil atheism. The 1647 version of the WCF had no such conception in mind, but taught that the civil government was also instituted by God, and therefore, there should be no separation of church and state in a Christian society. Since both church and government were instituted by God for the ordering of society there were levels of interaction and accountability between the two. The 1647 WCF is not Erastian, but neither does it grant secular authority over the church. While the American Presbyterians have still disagreed with our British counterparts on this point, it is unhelpful to describe their position in this way.

<sup>4</sup> This revision was made by the PCUS in the 1860s and by the PCUSA in 1887. The PCUSA, EPC, and ECO no longer have this sentence in their version of the Confession, but also have more extensive revisions. The extent of those revisions is such that to state that these churches hold to this amended paragraph is misleading.

<sup>5</sup> The PCUS maintained the 1647 version of this chapter, which was retained by the EPC. The OPC voted to restore the 1647 version to their Confession, which was followed by the PCA. Upon the merger the UPCUSA and PCUS in 1983 into the modern PCUSA, a Book of Confessions was adopted that included the versions of the WCF held by both churches. This parallel version is in use by ECO in their *Confessional Standards*.

	sinners to do what God commanded rather than not. However, because the acts were taken by sinful people, the acts remained sinful. The revised version simply states that the acts by sinners are not quite up to God's standard of glory.		
WCF 22.2 (Of Lawful Oaths and Vows)	<u>Deleted a single</u> sentence requiring Christians to take an oath when imposed by a lawful authority.	1903	PCUSA, OPC, PCA, EPC <sup>6</sup> , ECO.
WCF 25.6 (Of the Church)	<u>Deleted a clause</u> stating that the Pope is the anti-Christ and <u>rewrote a clause</u> stating that the Pope cannot be the head of the church in any sense, instead saying that no man may claim to be head of the church, and to do so is unscriptural and dishonors Christ.	1903 <sup>7</sup>	PCUSA, ARP, OPC, PCA, EPC, ECO.
WCF 34 (Of the Holy Spirit)	<u>Added a new chapter.</u>	1903	PCUSA, EPC, ECO.
WCF 35 (Of the Gospel and the Love of God and Missions)	<u>Added new chapter.</u>	1903	PCUSA, EPC, ECO.
Declaratory Statement	This statement was appended to the beginning of the Confession by the PCUSA and offered a "harmonization" of God's eternal decrees, the extent of Christ's atonement, and the free offer of the gospel with the intent of softening the historic Reformed nature of the Confession on these	1903	PCUSA, ECO. <sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This is addressed later in this section, but the EPC's version of the Confession includes this deleted line, possibly as a clerical error.

<sup>7</sup> The ARP only adopted the change related to the Pope as antichrist, and did so at a different date. The OPC and PCA kept the deletion related to the Pope as antichrist but otherwise returned to the pre-1903 version. The EPC later deleted that final clause altogether. My convictions align with the pre-1903 version, but like with the 1788 versions, that conviction is still compatible with the post-1903 versions of the Confession.

<sup>8</sup> The Declaratory Statement was a source of much debate in the early years of the EPC. At the 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the EPC the initial vote to adopt the statement passed 69-63. A recount was requested, where the adoption of the Statement failed by a single vote, 72-71. A record can be found in *Minutes of the Sixth General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church*, 6-26, page 31. Part of the reason the assembly declined to adopt the Statement was the belief that the added 35<sup>th</sup> chapter was adequate for the harmonization of election and the free offer of the gospel (see *Liberty in Non-Essentials*, page 90). For commentary on the question of the election of those dying in infancy and the EPC, see: <https://cameronshaffer.com/2018/11/01/on-the-salvation-of-infants-dying-in-infancy>.

	points. It also explicitly rejected the Confession, and stated that all who die in infancy are elect.		
General Note	The PCUS added a General Note to its proof texts for the Confession stating that it is in certain places “more specific in its statements than the Scriptures. These statements are inferences drawn from the Scriptures or from statements based on the Scriptures, or from the experience and observation of the Church. In such cases, no texts are cited, but reference is made to this General Note.”	1910	PCUSA, EPC, ECO.
WCF 24 (Of Marriage and Divorce)	<u>The chapter was completely rewritten</u> in two versions, both substantially less-robust than the 1647 version. <sup>9</sup> The changes accomplished several things. First, both versions made conditions for divorce and remarriage easier. Second, both deleted the explicit prohibition of Reformed Christians marrying infidels, papists <sup>10</sup> , or other idolaters. The PCUS version substituted this by urging evangelical Christians to marry other evangelicals. Third, the PCUS version identified marriage as possessing distinct civil and ecclesial significance. Fourth, the UPCUSA version deleted any connection between marriage and children. Fifth, the PCUS version stated that the church’s contribution in marriage included assuring couples of God’s grace in their marriage, giving it a Catholic-sacramental dimension.	1959	PCUSA, EPC, ECO.
WCF 25.6 (Of the Church)	<u>Deleted a clause</u> either stating “Nor can the pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof [the Church]” (1788) or “and the claim of any man to be the vicar of Christ and the head of the Church, is unscriptural, without warrant	1984	EPC.

<sup>9</sup> The first was by the UPCUSA in the early 1950s, and the second by the PCUS in 1959. The UPCUSA reduced the 1647 version from six paragraphs to two, while the PCUS rewrote the 1647 version. The PCUSA includes both in its Book of Confessions, as does ECO in their *Confessional Standards*. The EPC uses the PCUS version.

<sup>10</sup> The ARP separately deleted the reference to papists from this sentence.

	in fact, and is a usurpation dishonoring to the Lord Jesus Christ” (1903).		
WCF 27.4 (Of the Sacraments)	<u>Added the word</u> “ordinarily” into the Confession and replaced “only” with “ordinarily” in the Catechism. The goal was to allow church officers other than ministers of the word to administrate the sacraments, but has the effect of not disallowing anyone from doing so.	1986	EPC. <sup>11</sup>
WCF 24.5 (Of Marriage and Divorce) <sup>12</sup>	Deleted the clause “so that the marriage dies at the heart and the union becomes” from a description about valid conditions for divorce.	1992	EPC. <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This action was taken at the 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the EPC. WCF 28.2 (Of Baptism) and WLC 176 were later amended along the same lines.

<sup>12</sup> This is an amendment to the 1959 PCUS version of the WCF, not the original 1647 version, and occurred at the 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the EPC.

<sup>13</sup> Currently, the EPC website (<https://epc.org/about/distinctives/>) states that the “important” revisions made to the WCF bring the confession up to date. It is unclear if this means simply that the EPC holds the most revised version of the WCF, or that that the unrevised versions of the WCF are out of date.

### General Note

The “General Note” was added by the PCUS to the WCF and WLC in 1910, and was subsequently included by the EPC in our adoption of the Confession in 1984.<sup>14</sup> The General Note reads “At several points the Confession of Faith [or Larger Catechism] is more specific in its statements than the Scriptures. These statements are inferences drawn from the Scriptures or from statements based on the Scriptures, or from the experience and observation of the Church. In such cases, no texts are cited, but reference is made to this General Note.”

This note is included in the official introduction to the EPC’s version of the WCF, and appears as a citation in numerous sections of both the WCF and WLC. What is objectionable about this note? It undermines the hermeneutics of our confessional system by presenting two interpretive tracks for our doctrine: the first track is what scripture teaches explicitly, and the second track (without direct scriptural support) is simply inferential.

The Westminster Assembly never intended to use proof texts when drawing up the WCF and WLC. The Assembly had been convened by Parliament, and towards the end of the drafting process Parliament ordered the Assembly to add proof texts to the confessional documents. The Assembly protested, and stated in a letter to Parliament that listing the scriptural proofs for the WCF would require an entire volume, and requiring those texts immediately would require a debate in the Assembly where any man may offer up a proof text. The Assembly did not believe that simply citing proof texts, as Parliament desired, would fully and properly capture the Assembly’s understanding of how they biblically arrived at their theological conclusions.<sup>15</sup> Parliament insisted, and so proof texts were added.

WCF 1.6 states, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” This is a hermeneutical distinctive of the Reformed tradition.<sup>16</sup> The truth of scripture is not just set down in a loose collection of logical propositions, but is a truth communicated in an interwoven manner that requires interpretive skill (WCF 1.7). Doctrine derived from scripture does not just come from explicit statements, but requires an understanding of scripture’s complex nature. The Assembly was concerned that providing proof texts would lead readers to conclude that the WCF’s affirmations were based only on explicit

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<sup>14</sup> *Minutes of the Fourth General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church*, 4-23, page 13. It is informative that the PCA, birthed out of the PCUS in 1973, did not include the General Note in their version of the WCF and WLC.

<sup>15</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1652* (Oxford, U.K: Oxford University Press, 2012), Vol 5, 310-311.

<sup>16</sup> Contrast with the London Baptist Confession (1689), which was a baptistic revision of the WCF: “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture” (LBC 1.6). The General Note, in effect, shifts the EPC’s confessional hermeneutic away from Westminster and closer to the LBC by isolating a few points of the WCF and WLC into the category of inference, and leaving the rest presented in a hermeneutically baptistic expressiveness.



statements of scripture, rather than by “good and necessary consequences.”<sup>17</sup> At first glance this appears to be the same principle as stated in the General Note: scripture is authoritative either by its explicit teaching or by what is logically deduced from its teaching.

However, the assembly addressed this by providing proof texts that functioned as signposts of the deductive work undergirding the confessional system. For example, WCF 28.3 on the mode of baptism cites Hebrews 9:10, 19-22, not because there is an explicit statement about sprinkling being the proper mode of baptism, but because the deduction from the Bible’s teaching on covenant and sacraments leads to that authoritative conclusion. The proof texts do not function as a direct quote to affirm that doctrine, but as an indication of the hermeneutic at work, which reflects not just explicit scriptural statements, but the complex unity of the Bible.

By adding the General Note as the “proof text” throughout the WCF and WLC, it is communicated that where the General Note is, that is where deductive work is in action, and where it is not present, there the proof texts represent doctrine “expressly set down” rather than interpretive work being at play. The General Note has the effect of communicating that the Confession is primarily informed by express statements from scripture, with a subordinate track of logical inference. In instances where it is clearer that reasonable hermeneutical deduction was informing the selection of proof texts, the General Note serves to communicate that the proof text is not legitimate (e.g. WCF 28.3): “Since we have a General Note to tell us when inference is informing the Confession, and since the General Note is not employed here, then these proof texts *must* be explicit about this doctrine. But this one is not explicit, so the Confession must be incorrectly using scripture at this point, which means that this doctrine must be brought into question.” This is not just a hypothetical concern, but a conversation that I have had many times, including with elders in the EPC.

The reverse problem also occurs: if there are two hermeneutical tracks, and the primary track requires explicit support from scripture, then the places where the General Note is used do not appear to have as much scriptural support, and therefore are not as important or likely to be true. This effect is best captured visually. If one peruses the WCF’s proof texts, and among the myriad of biblical references is “see General Note,” a strong biblical basis for the doctrine is not conveyed.

To get a sense of how it is used, here are the places where the General Note is employed:<sup>18</sup>

Section	Statement
WCF 1.1: Holy Scripture	Since God no longer reveals himself to his people in those earlier ways [of revelation in the Old Testament and apostolic era]

<sup>17</sup> This is partially why the OPC does not include proof texts in its official version of the Confession or Catechisms. While it does publish versions of the WCF and Catechisms that includes the original proof texts from the Westminster Assembly, the proof texts are not considered part of the OPC’s constitution.

<sup>18</sup> While typically I will use the original WCF and WLC, here I am using the EPC’s version in order to better show how the General Note affects our specific confessional documents.

WCF 3.8: God's Decrees	This important and mysterious doctrine of predestination must be treated with special discretion and care, so that, paying attention to and obeying the will of God revealed in his word, men may be assured that they have been eternally chosen from the certainty of their effectual calling. In this way the doctrine of predestination will elicit not only our praise, reverence, and admiration for God, but also a humble and diligent life, fully supporting everyone who sincerely obeys the gospel.
WCF 7.1: God's Covenant with Man	The distance between God and his creation is so great, that, although reasoning creatures owe him obedience as their creator, they nonetheless could never realize any blessedness or reward from him without his willingly condescending to them. And so it pleased God to provide for man by means of covenants.
WCF 23.3: Civil Authorities	It is also [the Civil Authorities'] duty to see to it that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies are held without disturbance.
WCF 27.4: The Sacraments	Ordinarily, neither of these may be administered by anyone but a lawfully ordained minister of the word.
WCF 28.2: Baptism	... ordinarily by a lawfully called minister of the gospel. <sup>19</sup>
WCF 31.3: Synods and Councils	Since apostolic times all synods and councils, whether general or local, may make mistakes, and many have. Consequently synods and councils are not to be made a final authority in questions of faith and living but are to be used as an aid to both.
WLC 4: What evidence is there that the Bible is the word of God?	...by its illuminating power to convince and convert sinners and to comfort and build up believers unto salvation...
WLC 5: What does the Bible primarily teach?	The Bible primarily teaches what we must believe about God and what God requires of us.
WLC 7: What is God?	God is a spirit, who in and of himself is infinite in...perfection.

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<sup>19</sup> There is a certain irony in relying on the General Note for the EPC's version of this doctrine, while the original WCF and WLC actually cite scripture.

WLC 38: Why did the mediator have to be God?	The mediator had to be God so that he might sustain and keep his human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God and the power of death;
WLC 40: Why did the mediator have to be God and human in one person?	The mediator, who was to reconcile God and humanity, had to be himself both God and human and in one person to make the works appropriate to each nature acceptable to God on our behalf...
WLC 169: What are Christ's directions for giving and receiving the bread and wine in the sacrament of the Lord's supper?	Christ has directed ministers of his word to administer the sacrament of the Lord's supper. First, they should set apart the bread and wine from their ordinary use by the biblical declaration, thanksgiving, and prayer. Then they take the bread, break it, and give both it and the wine to the communicants, who, according to the same directions, are to eat the bread and drink the wine, thankfully remembering that the body of Christ was broken and given, and his blood shed, for them.
WLC 176: In what ways do the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper coincide?	...are ordinarily to be administered by ministers of the gospel...

There are also another 17 instances where the proof texts include commentary in a manner reminiscent of the General Note without actually citing it.<sup>20</sup> What the above table hopefully shows is that it is not just in minor areas of the WCF (e.g. civil authorities and church gatherings), but in very significant areas of doctrine where the General Note is employed. Christ as God and Man, God being infinite in his own perfection, and covenant theology, among other doctrines, are displayed as being scripturally derived in a different manner from the rest of the Confession. This is a problem, and does more to confuse than to clarify.

The EPC should delete the General Note along with the other 17 interpretive proof "texts". Doing so does not harm the WCF or WLC, but does our church the service of presenting a single, unified hermeneutic within our confessional system. It also moves our Confession closer to the work of the Westminster Assembly, with the proof texts operating as guides to the interpretive grid being used rather than being perceived as explicit statements with a one-to-one correlation with the Confession's doctrine. Pastorally, this is something I find more helpful, because it forces me and my congregants to consider *how* the Bible works in developing a system of doctrine, and does not leave us content to just search for propositional validation of doctrine.

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<sup>20</sup> WCF 1.3, 1.6, 1.8, 5.4, 7.2, 19.2, 21.4, 21.7, 23.4, 28.7, 29.4, 29.6, 29.7, WLC 20, 22, 173, 183. It is not clear when these proof text commentaries were adopted. The ones in the WCF are included in Kelly, Douglas F., Hugh McClure, and Philip B. Rollinson. *The Westminster Confession of Faith: An Authentic Modern Version*. 4th ed. Signal Mountain, Tenn: Summertown Texts, 2004. It seems likely that these proof "text" commentaries were adopted along with the General Note in 1910.

### The Imposition of Oaths By Lawful Authority

In 1903 the PCUSA amended WCF 22.3. Originally it stated “Whosoever taketh an oath ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act; and therein to avouch nothing but what he is fully persuaded is the truth. Neither may any man bind himself by oath to anything but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform. *Yet it is a sin to refuse an oath touching anything that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority.*” It was the italicized sentence which was deleted.<sup>21</sup>

The second General Assembly of the OPC in 1936 assessed all of the 1903 PCUSA revisions to the WCF and retained this change. The PCUS did not alter the Confession on this point<sup>22</sup> and it became part of the PCUSA’s Book of Confessions in 1983.

The ordination vows for the EPC since its inception in 1981 have included subscription to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms; the Westminster Standards have always been part of the EPC’s constitution. An overture was received at the 3<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly of the EPC in 1983 that sought to clarify which version of the WCF were in view for this ordination vow.<sup>23</sup> This overture was adopted with some modification at the 4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 1984.<sup>24</sup> The adopted, modern language version was actually a study guide which focused on the pre-1900 versions of the WCF, but also included a variety of other historical revisions for study, such as the 1647 WCF chapter on marriage alongside both the UPCUSA and PCUS versions of the chapter. The motions for adopting the WCF that passed the General Assembly specified adopting the PCUS’ chapter on marriage, affirmed adding chapters 34 and 35, and deleted a sentence on the head of the church.

The EPC’s founding churches primarily came out of the UPCUSA, and so most churches held the version of the WCF used by that denomination. However, a number of churches also came out of the PCUS, and so had previously subscribed to the unaltered version of WCF 22.3. The overture from the 3<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly was designed to clarify which version of the WCF the EPC already held, and specified a number of specific modifications to affirm or reject.

It is not clear from these actions what the “baseline” version of the WCF was for the EPC. No mention is made of the pre-1903 amendments, so it can be rightly assumed that the baseline was one of the versions of the WCF held at the time by the UPCUSA or PCUS. However, there is no mention made of WCF 16.7, which was only amended by the UPCUSA. So, it may seem that the baseline version being evaluated was the Confession shared by the UPCUSA and PCUS insofar as they overlapped, which makes sense in light of the PCUS’ version of WCF 24 being adopted. However, both WCF 34 and 35 were additionally affirmed, even though both the UPCUSA and PCUS included them. It does not appear that a consistent standard was used in determining the starting point for amendments.

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<sup>21</sup> The modern language version adopted by the EPC reads, “It is a sin to refuse to swear an oath about anything good and just, when it is required by lawful authority.”

<sup>22</sup> Although the PCA followed the OPC in making this change to the Confession at their formation in 1973.

<sup>23</sup> *Minutes of the Third General Assembly of the EPC*, Overture D, page 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Minutes of the Fourth General Assembly of the EPC*, pages 13, 15.

So, it is unclear whether the version of WCF adopted in 1984 was intended to include the 1903 amendment to WCF 22.3. If the baseline version of the WCF was the version held by the UPCUSA, then its amendments (potentially along with the revision to WCF 16.7) should have been included. If the baseline was either the pre-1903 version, or the version shared by both the UPCUSA and PCUS, it should not have been included, and a discussion needs to be had as to its inclusion.

I will make the case that if this clause was validly included in the EPC WCF, it should be deleted by constitutional amendment. This is a rare occurrence of siding with American revisionists against the Westminster Assembly, but when you side with J. Gresham Machen, it is hard to go wrong.<sup>25</sup> And the uniformity of the American revision of WCF 22.3 is the first point for its deletion: the PCUSA and ECO, as inheritors of the UPCUSA's edition of the WCF, no longer have this clause. The OPC retained its deletion, and the PCA, without any formal connection to the UPCUSA's edition of the WCF, proactively followed the OPC and deleted the clause as well. The EPC needs to ask why we think it is worth keeping.

WCF 22.2 and the 1647 version of WCF 23.3 appear to end similarly. WCF 22.2, "...so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken." But there is an important difference. WCF 22.2 is affirming that oaths are part of worship and should be done with reverence. Oaths find their warrant in God's word and therefore when imposed (i.e. administered) by a lawful authority should be taken. The point is that it is not sinful to swear an oath if done properly.

WCF 22.3 instructs people to consider the nature of their oaths before swearing them, and then only to swear to do what is good and what they are actually able to do. It is here that the 1647 WCF version states, "Yet it is a sin to refuse an oath touching anything that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority." If an authority (religious or otherwise) wants you to swear an oath for something that is good, and you do not want to, the 1647 WCF asserts that to refuse to do so is sinning.

A quick example should make it clear why this is a problem: are we willing to tell our congregations that they are sinning if they are unwilling to say the Pledge of Allegiance? To bar them from the Lord's Supper if they "stubbornly" refuse to say it? It is a good thing to love your country and be dedicated to her, so there is nothing sinful in itself in saying the Pledge, and it could be wise to encourage it. But to compel people under threat of censure for not pledging allegiance to their country is not something defensible from scripture, no matter how good a pledge or country it is.

Another example: parents are a lawful authority placed by God over their children, yet we do not think it is sinful if their kids refuse to swear an oath for an arranged marriage. Marriage is a good and just thing, but a child (either about to come of age or already an adult) who is still required to honor their parents is not sinning by declining to commit to a marriage they do not want. In fact, WCF 24.3 specifically states this.

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<sup>25</sup> Machen was an *ex officio* member of a three-member committee of the OPC tasked with assessing the 1903 revisions to the WCF. The committee was chaired by Ned Stonehouse, another professor at Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS). The report can be found online here: <https://www.opc.org/GA/constitution.html>.

Examples could proliferate: being forced to testify in court against your spouse or yourself, becoming ordained as an elder under duress (our congregants beware!), being compelled to join the military, or being forced to swear loyalty to a specific politician or government official rather than to a nation, etc...

While not definitive, the proof texts used by the Westminster Assembly for this sentence are helpful in evaluating it. They are Exodus 22:7-11, Numbers 5:19,21, and Nehemiah 5:12. All three of these texts include a person making an oath as a matter of civil or criminal law. However, all three of them include the parties swearing oaths voluntarily, either as part of their voluntary restitution and repentance, or as part of their plea of innocence. These examples all reflect the doctrinal principle stated in the previous paragraph of WCF 22.2 that it is ok to swear oaths if done legitimately, not the assertion of WCF 22.3 that it is sinful to refuse an imposed oath.

The final sentence of WCF 22.3 teaches a view of authority that is more reflective of 17<sup>th</sup> century Britain than scripture. It should have been deleted with the rest of the initial American amendments to the WCF in 1788 that dealt with the power of the civil magistrate. As written, the EPC's version of WCF 22.3 is inconsistent with other parts of the Confession (such as its doctrine of marriage), inconsistent with our own experience, and indefensible from scripture. While some elders of the EPC may believe that this sentence is indeed biblical, the testimony in its favor is flimsy and the ecclesial witness against it strong. Deleting this sentence does not require elders to believe that it is incorrect, but provides the freedom to officers of the EPC to either affirm or deny.

The EPC should do one of two things with this sentence. It should first investigate whether or not the intent of the 4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly was to include this sentence in our version of the WCF. If not, it should be stricken from the WCF as a clerical error. Second, the EPC should either proactively, or after the investigation completes and it is determined that the 4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly intended for the sentence to remain, delete this sentence by constitutional amendment.

### Of Marriage and Divorce

During the 1950s both the UPCUSA and the PCUS rewrote WCF 24 on marriage.<sup>26</sup> The PCUS version from 1959 was adopted by the EPC, with some additional revisions in the 1990s.<sup>27</sup> The 1647 version had six paragraphs, while the 1959 version has seven. Some are doctrinally identical while there are some significant deletions, additions, and consolidations. Currently, the only other denominations with this version of WCF 24 are the PCUSA and ECO, neither of which require their ministers to subscribe to the Westminster Standards, but only to be guided by their respective collection of confessions. The EPC stands alone in requiring subscription to this chapter as containing the system of doctrine taught in the scriptures. Therefore, this rewritten chapter needs to be reexamined in comparison with the 1647 version.

WCF 1647	WCF 1959
WCF 24.1: Marriage is to be between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband, at the same time.	WCF 24.1: Marriage is a union between one man and one woman, designed of God to last so long as they both shall live.
WCF 24.2: Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue, and of the church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness.	WCF 24.2: Marriage is designed for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the safeguarding, undergirding, and development of their moral and spiritual character; for the propagation of children and the rearing of them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Doctrinally, WCF 24.1 is essentially the same in both versions. They both affirm that marriage is to be between one man and one woman. The 1647 has a stronger emphasis on monogamy, while the 1959 version emphasizes the nature of the life-long intent for marriage. There is essentially no doctrinal difference between WCF 24.2 in either version as well. Both affirm that marriage is for, i) the help and benefit of both husband and wife, ii) the propagation of children, iii) the raising and propagating of children for the church, iv) and to morally restrain and upbuild both husband and wife. The 1647 version is more clearly drawing from the cultural mandate in Genesis 1:28, and on that count is superior.

<sup>26</sup> The EPC adopted the PCUS version in 1984, *Minutes of the Fourth General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church*, 4-23, page 13. See also Appendix G.B.IV, Motion #1, page 178. The ‘Afterward on the Texts’ in the EPC’s official version of the WCF states that at the close of the Civil War both the PCUSA and PCUS revised this chapter, with the EPC adopting the PCUS version. The timing is incorrect, and the ‘Afterward’ is probably conflating the 19<sup>th</sup> century deletion of the clause, “The man may not marry any of his wife’s kindred, nearer in blood than he may of his own: nor the woman of her husband’s kindred, nearer in blood than of her own” with the revisions in the 1950s.

<sup>27</sup> At the 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, the clause “so that the marriage dies at the heart and the union becomes” was deleted from WCF 24.5.

WCF 1647	WCF 1959
<p>WCF 24.3: It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgment to give their consent. Yet it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord. And therefore such as profess the true reformed religion should not marry with infidels, papists, or other idolaters: neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life, or maintain damnable heresies.</p>	<p>WCF 24.3: All persons who are able with judgment to give their consent may marry, except within the limits of blood relationship forbidden by Scripture, and such marriages are valid before God in the eyes of the church. But no marriage can be fully and securely Christian in spirit or in purpose unless both partners are committed to a common Christian faith and to a deeply shared intention of building a Christian home. Evangelical Christians should seek as partners in marriage only persons who hold in common a sound basis of evangelical faith.</p>
<p>WCF 24.4: Marriage ought not to be within the degrees of consanguinity or affinity forbidden by the Word. Nor can such incestuous marriages ever be made lawful by any law of man or consent of parties, so as those persons may live together as man and wife.</p>	

The 1647 version of WCF 24.3 affirms that marriage is a gift for all people regardless of religion, but that it is “the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord.” The 1647 version is constructing a contrast between the gift of marriage to all of humanity (including non-Christians) on the one hand, and the biblical limitations placed upon Christians when they marry on the other. It then specifies what “to marry only in the Lord” actually means. The 1647 version of 24.4 then prohibits incestuous marriages.

The 1959 version of WCF 24.3 in effect combines the topics of the 1647 version’s 24.3-24.4, but reorders the emphasis:

All persons who are able with judgment to give their consent may marry, except within the limits of blood relationship forbidden by Scripture, and such marriages are valid before God in the eyes of the church. But no marriage can be fully and securely Christian in spirit or in purpose unless both partners are committed to a common Christian faith and to a deeply shared intention of building a Christian home...

There are two things to be observed here. The first is that whereas the 1647 version began by asserting that marriage is a gift for all mankind and that the limitation for Christians is to marry other Christians, the 1959 began by asserting that all people are able to be married within the limits placed by scripture on blood relationships. Then it discusses the relationship of faith to marriage. The difference is subtle, but key: the 1647 version of WCF 24.3 emphasizes that all people (not just Christians) have been blessed with marriage, while the 1959 version’s emphasis is that you can marry anyone, as long as they are a Christian and it is not incestuous. This is why the clause, “such marriages are valid before God in the eyes of the church” is included in the 1959 version. It is



focused on describing the church's approval of the marriage of its members, and an incestuous relationship would not be valid for its people.

The 1959 version is actually narrower in scope than 1647: the "all persons" in the 1959 version of WCF 24.3 refers to the eligibility of potential spouses (non-incestuous, and Christian) while the "all sorts of people" in the 1647 version of WCF 24.3 refers to the group of people blessed by God with the gift of marriage: everyone. The 1647 version of WCF 24 is interested in the universal gift of marriage and how Christians are to treat it. The 1959 version is interested in how Christians are to treat marriage. While the distinction may not be doctrinally meaningful for WCF 24.3, it is a hallmark of the 1959 version of WCF 24.4.

The second thing to be noticed is the difference between the language of "duty" from 1647 and the language of "can be fully or securely Christian in spirit or purpose" from 1959. One is consistent with the rest of the Westminster Standards,<sup>28</sup> the other is wishy-washy, modernistic drivel. The 1647 version of WCF 24.3 identifies marrying infidels (i.e. non-Christians), papists, other practitioners of idolatry, people persisting in unrepentant sin, and holding damnable heresies as incompatible with marrying in the Lord. The 1959 version states that in order for a marriage to be securely Christian in spirit both "partners" need to be "committed to a common (similar?) Christian faith and to a deeply shared intention of building a Christian home." The 1959 version goes on to state that "Evangelical Christians should seek as partners in marriage only persons who hold in common a sound basis of evangelical faith." The tonal differences are stark: 1647 stresses duty and obedience, 1959 compatibility and seeking a spouse.

The 1959 version of WCF 24.3 is attempting to promote harmonious marriages, along with some additional advice. The use of the word 'common' is telling. "No marriage can be fully Christian...unless both partners are committed to a common Christian faith...Evangelical Christians should seek as partners...only persons who hold in common..." The former clause is the premise of the latter: evangelical Christians should seek evangelical partners because of the common faith. The priority is the harmony of the marriage. "Evangelical Christians *should seek*" others like them falls far short of the firmness expressed in the 1647 version's, "*duty to marry only in the Lord...should not marry* [non-Christians and sinners]." To put it simply, the 1959 version of WCF 24.3 only teaches good ideas for wise living. The 1647 teaches obedience and warns against sin. Follow the 1647 version and the counsel of 1959 will come along; inverse the order, and marriage becomes about "good fit." The clause the EPC deleted from 1959 on the grounds of too easily permitting divorce is not an outlier, but is entirely consistent with, and characteristic of, the 1959 version's cavalier spirit.

It is disappointing that "those who profess the true reformed religion" was replaced with "Evangelical Christians." In some ways that change is representative of the entire 1959 overhaul: out with the historical and robust, in with a term with no confessional grounding whose definition is entirely subjective.

The most significant change made in the 1959 version was the addition of an entirely new paragraph, WCF 24.4:

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<sup>28</sup> WSC 3: Q: What do the scriptures principally teach? A: The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

Marriage for the Christian has religious as well as civil significance. The distinctive contribution of the church in performing the marriage ceremony is to affirm the divine institution of marriage; to invoke God's blessing upon those who enter into the marital relationship in accordance with his word; to hear the vows of those who desire to be married; and to assure the married partners of God's grace within their new relationship.

The importance of this paragraph lies in its initial assertion: there are distinctly religious as well as civil significances to marriage. In the WCF the term 'religious' does not have connotations of generic piety, nor is it synonymous with 'Christian'. It is used in direct connection to ecclesiology and worship (e.g. WCF 21 is titled "Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day"). The "distinctive contribution of the church" as the religious significance of marriage is not a description of what results if a wedding happens to occur in a church, but is a description of the alleged biblical duty required of the church in performing weddings. The "religious significance" is a significance of ecclesial and doxological duty. And this duty is bifurcated from the "civil significance" of marriage, an aspect which is not developed in the 1959 version, even though it asserts that there is this different significance, which presumably should have a biblical basis.<sup>29</sup> This is an unfortunate distinction, since marriage was given to all of humanity as part of the cultural mandate, and therefore primarily has a God-ordained social (i.e. civil) significance.

No such statement about the religious significance exists in the 1647 version of the WCF, for the very simple reason that the Westminster Assembly could not have affirmed it. Many Reformers and Puritans believed that marriage was a civil institution, not a religious one. Marriage was not given to the church, but to humanity. The sacramental theology of the Roman Catholic Church had both elevated marriage in importance (making it a means of grace) and denigrated its role (denying it to the clergy). But since marriage was a gift common to all of humanity, it was not a function of worship, but of society.

Scottish theologian Alexander Henderson, who was a delegate to the Westminster Assembly, also crafted the *Government and Order of the Scottish Church* (1641) as the CoS official book of order and worship. He stated,

Although marriage be no Sacrament, nor part of the Worship of God, yet they conceive that the Matrimonial conjunction of Christians and members of the Church is most conveniently solemnised in the face of the Congregation, with instruction out of God's Word, of the Institution, use, and ends of marriage, and of the duties of married persons, and with blessing by the Minister, and with the prayers of the Church.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This separation of civil and religious significance in marriage inevitably breeds confusion, and leads to the belief that there are distinct civil and religious marriages. The discussions heads towards a desire to 'privatize marriage' by making it an entirely personal, religious affair absent the state, since religious marriage is surely more important than civil marriage (see here for more info: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/60-second-summary-privatizing-marriage/>). The other option is to pursue denominational rules for the differing civil and religious kinds of marriage. A 2017 meeting of the Midwest Presbytery of the EPC included an extended discussion of this nature. If the civil and religious aspects of marriage are divided, it is unavoidable that people will start proposing different denominational rules governing which kinds of marriages ministers should involve themselves, and whether civil "marriages" are marriages at all.

<sup>30</sup> §5, "The Order of Marriage." It can be read online here: <https://archive.org/details/govordero00hend/page/26>.

The performance of a marriage is not inherently part of the church. There is no “religious significance” to it; though instituted by God, it is not part of Christian worship. Yet, since it is instituted by God, it is “most *convenient*” to officiate weddings in a congregation. Henderson’s chief role at the Westminster Assembly was in drafting the *Directory of Public Worship* (1645).<sup>31</sup> The *Directory* states, in turn,

ALTHOUGH marriage be no sacrament, nor peculiar to the church of God, but common to mankind, and of publick interest in every commonwealth; yet, because such as marry are to marry in the Lord, and have special need of instruction, direction, and exhortation, from the word of God, at their entering into such a new condition, and of the blessing of God upon them therein, we judge it expedient that marriage be solemnized by a lawful minister of the word, that he may accordingly counsel them, and pray for a blessing upon them... And we advise that it be not on the Lord’s day.<sup>32</sup>

The content is the same between *Government and Order* and the *Directory*: marriage is not part of Christian worship, nor does it possess an inherent and distinct religious character. However, “we judge it *expedient*” that marriages be performed in and by the church.

The church is not derelict in its duty or mission if it does not perform weddings. The Westminster Confession and Catechisms comment on marriage as something that God has instituted for all people as part of creation, and therefore there is a God-honoring way to approach marriage. Simply put, there is no distinctly religious significance to marriage in the way the 1959 WCF intends.

This view is not a relic of the past either. As recently as its 2018 General Assembly this was being discussed in the PCA.<sup>33</sup> A FCoS minister once put it to me this way: “American Christians are preparing for a time when their government will require any churches which perform biblical marriages to also officiate homosexual weddings. You are readying yourselves for civil disobedience by only officiating biblical marriages when that time comes. In Scotland we would barely shrug if this happened. It is nice and good for ministers to officiate weddings, and it would be a travesty if our government mandated this, but we have never believed that the church’s mission included performing marriages. The mission of the church would go on unhampered.” There is a missional freedom in this historic Reformed view.

The 1959 version also errs in what it considers to actually be the church’s distinctive contributions to performing a marriage. While the majority of components listed easily map onto the *Directory* (affirming divine institution of marriage, invoking God’s blessing according to his word, hearing the vows of the couple), the final item listed is unique: “Assuring the married partners of God’s grace within their new relationship.” ‘Grace’ is one of those terms that Protestants often throw around lightly when they mean something like kindness, mercy, blessing, or being nice. But without exception, ‘grace’ is used in the WCF to reference God’s characteristic mercy displayed and given to his people through the redemptive mediation of Christ (e.g. WCF 3.5, 7.4, 7.6, 11.1, 12.1, 14.1, 26.1, etc...). There are only two times when grace is described as being “in” something. The first is WCF

<sup>31</sup> [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911\\_Encyclop%C3%A6dia\\_Britannica/Henderson,\\_Alexander](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Henderson,_Alexander).

<sup>32</sup> § ‘Of the Solemnization of Marriage’.

<sup>33</sup> See here: <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/1517/moving-forward-in-the-pca>.

21.5, “singing of psalms with grace in the heart.” This is a description of the Christian’s response to God in worship out of the transformation of our union with Christ. The second is WCF 27.3, “The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used,” which is describing the means of applying the benefits of Christ’s mediation as signs and seals of the covenant of grace.<sup>34</sup>

There are then several interpretive options for understanding the use of the term ‘grace’ in the 1959 version of WCF 24.4. The first is that it is an entirely singular use of the term, meaning something like “the church’s contribution is to assure the new married partners of God’s favor and the success of their new marriage.” While an entirely possible meaning, this definition is inconsistent both with how ‘grace’ is used throughout the rest of the Westminster Standards and with our Confession’s teaching on God’s providence. There is no assurance from God in his word that marriages will be happy, pleasant, successful, or joyous. The second interpretive option is that ‘grace’ here is used in the same manner as its employment in the rest of the Westminster Standards, meaning something like, “the church’s contribution is to assure the new married partners of the representation of Christ and the benefits of his redemptive work in their new marriage.” This would make ‘grace’ semantically consistent with the rest of the WCF, but the doctrinal substance of WCF 24.4 would now indicate that marriage has a sacramental function. This is the language and arguments employed by the Roman Catholic Church from the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries to the present day, and violates the system of doctrine taught in the scriptures.

The error of the 1959 version of WCF 24.4 is that *there is no grace* within marriage. To defend this assertion requires twisting the Westminster Standards into a completely different meaning.

Now, many EPC elders probably believe that the church has an obligation to perform weddings, and perhaps believe that marriage is full of grace (after all, it is a sanctifying experience). The difference is that the 1647 version of the WCF does not mandate belief on this subject either way. The 1959 version does. Once again, the 1959 version is narrower than the 1647 version while simultaneously being out of touch with our Reformed heritage.

WCF 1647	WCF 1959
<p>WCF 24.5: Adultery or fornication committed after a contract, being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent party to dissolve that contract. In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.</p>	<p>WCF 24.5: It is the divine intention that persons entering the marriage covenant become inseparably united, thus allowing for no dissolution save that caused by the death of either husband or wife. However, the weaknesses of one or both partners may lead to gross and persistent denial of the marriage vows; yet only in cases of extreme, unrepented-of, and irremediable unfaithfulness (physical or spiritual) should separation or divorce be considered. Such separation or divorce is accepted as permissible only because of the failure of one or both of the partners, and does not lessen in any way the divine intention for indissoluble union.</p>

<sup>34</sup> cf. WLC 153, 161.

<p>WCF 24.6: Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet, nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case.</p>	<p>WCF 24.6: The remarriage of divorced persons may be sanctioned by the church in keeping with the redemptive gospel of Christ, when sufficient penitence for sin and failure is evident, and a firm purpose of and endeavor after Christian marriage is manifested.</p>
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Elements of the 1647 version of WCF 24.5 and 24.6 are deleted, modified, and rearranged in the 1959 versions of those chapters.

The subject matter of the first sentence of the 1647 version of WCF 24.5, “Adultery or fornication committed after a contract, being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent party to dissolve that contract,” is entirely absent from the 1959 version. This sentence is referencing adultery or fornication during a marriage engagement, something with more social weight in 17<sup>th</sup> century Britain than present day America, which is probably why it was not included in the 1959 version. There is still some contemporary value to including this sentence. There are a number of fundamentalist groups in the U.S. who treat engagements as a pseudo-marriage commitment, and many fraternal partners of the EPC operate in countries where marriage contracts are quite significant. Retaining a confessional reminder that betrothals are not permanently binding is still pastorally useful.

The last sentence of the 1647 version of WCF 24.5 is heavily modified in the 1959 version of WCF 24.6. 1647 states, “In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.” The 1647 version is silent about the remarriage of the guilty (i.e. adulterous) party after a divorce, leaving freedom in beliefs for ministers. The innocent (i.e. the one betrayed by adultery) is free to remarry. This is cut and dry. The 1959 version of WCF 24.6 muddies this: “The remarriage of divorced persons may be sanctioned by the church...when sufficient penitence for sin and failure is evident, and a firm purpose of and endeavor after Christian marriage is manifested.” There is no acknowledgment here of guilty and innocent parties in a divorce. The one betrayed is required to repent just as much as the betrayer. The divorcees are required to repent not just for their sin, but for their failures. It is just sad that the 1959 version of 24.6 would state that there are things other than sin for which people need to repent.<sup>35</sup> How do you repent for a failure that is separate from sin? The insertion of “failure” here is part of the 1959 version’s logic that in divorce there are two guilty parties. The idea is that the innocent party may not have sinned by committing adultery, but their marital failures may have driven their former spouse to another lover. This idea agrees with the

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<sup>35</sup> Compare with WSC 87: Q. What is repentance unto life? A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

logic of the 1959 version of WCF 24, but not 1647. Again, the 1959 version is narrower in biblical freedom than the 1647 version.<sup>36</sup>

The 1959 version of WCF 24.6 states that those previously divorced may have their remarriages “sanctioned by the church in keeping with the redemptive gospel of Christ, when sufficient penitence for sin...is evident.” The Westminster Standards teach that redemption is the reconciling of sinners to God as he makes all things new. Redemption is not the idea that the consequences and effects of sin are absolved in this life, and the gospel certainly does not say redemption is contingent upon “sufficient penitence” being made. This statement resounds with modernistic theology: the gospel is Christ remedying wrongs, and when I do wrong, I can then do enough right things in order to receive that remedy. It is a bizarre, feel-good statement incompatible with the rest of our confession.

The 1647 version of WCF 24.5-6 is clear about the sufficient causes of ending a marriage: adultery and irreversible, willful desertion. The 1647 version of WCF 24.6 even begins, “Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage.” In other words, our sinful condition motivates us to contrive fancy reasons to justify divorce other than on these two grounds. And the 1959 version of WCF 24.5 attempts to do just that.

The 1959 version states that not even gross or persistent denial of marriage vows, but only extreme, unrepented-of, and irremediable unfaithfulness should lead to consideration of divorce. This is incredibly ambiguous and wide-ranging. What would gross or persistent denial of marriage vows look like apart from adultery or abandonment? What is the difference between a “gross” denial of marriage vows and “extreme” unfaithfulness? Is there a meaningful distinction between “persistent” denial of marriage vows and “unrepented-of” unfaithfulness? It is not difficult to imagine an offending spouse claiming that the innocent party is pursuing an unjust divorce because the offender’s adultery was only a “gross” denial and did not amount to “extreme” unfaithfulness. Confessionally, 1959 makes it impossible to refute the offending spouse.

The other aspect of this is that the 1959 version of WCF 24.5 does not identify either adultery or desertion as grounds for divorce, but only “unfaithfulness (physical or spiritual).” The vagueness is not intended to be more restrictive than the 1647 version, but more permissive. The lack of specificity is designed to be able to become more easily “apt to study arguments to put asunder those whom God hath joined in marriage.” The easy-divorce culture of ‘irreconcilable differences’ that permeates American evangelicalism is the fruit of these kind of confessional revisions. The EPC has fortunately stated without equivocation that the only permissible grounds for divorce are

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<sup>36</sup> In 1995 The 15<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the EPC adopted a position paper on divorce and remarriage that can be found here: <http://epcoga.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/Files/1-Who-We-Are/B-About-The-EPC/Position-Papers/PositionPaper-DivorceAndRemarriage.pdf>. The paper states, “However, when one of the spouses in a former union remarries, we may conclude that the other is free to remarry because the former marriage relationship has been permanently broken by the remarriage” (page 8). The non-committal “we may conclude” allows leeway for Sessions to determine whether an offending party may remarry and for determining that an offending party is never again able to ever manifest a “purpose of and endeavor for Christian marriage.” It is disappointing that the position paper follows the logic of the 1959 WCF in placing the freedom to remarry, even for the innocent party, upon the remarriage of their former spouse, rather than following the 1647 version where legitimate divorce immediately frees the innocent party to remarry.

adultery and willful desertion,<sup>37</sup> but it is discouraging that a position paper of the denomination has to compensate for the inadequacies of its confession of faith.

Perhaps to cushion the allowances being made in its revisions on the previous point, and to appear protective of marriage as an institution, the 1959 version also adds a layer of rules upon the innocent party. For the unfaithfulness to be egregious enough to permit divorce it must be “unrepented-of” and “irremediable.” Only then may divorce be “considered.” The conclusion of this logic is that if one spouse commits adultery and then repents, the betrayed spouse *must not* consider divorce. “Irremediable” in the context of adultery would not just require that the adultery cease, but indicates that the innocent party *must* pursue reconciliation and reunion – remedying the marital relationship. Only if that remedying fails (again, undefinable) is divorce to be considered. This logic is borne out in the EPC position paper “Divorce and Remarriage.” In the paper’s synopsis it states, “Divorce is not necessitated in any event, and Sessions should exhort couples considering such a step to actively pursue reconciliation.”<sup>38</sup>

But that is a very different thing from saying that they *must* divorce. God’s call to us is to love and to forgive. Therefore, even adultery does not necessitate divorce. There must always be the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation, and this should be seriously pursued. Indeed, married couples who have experienced a break in covenant faithfulness should strive to repair their relationship through forgiveness, reconciliation, and personal transformation before divorce proceedings are initiated...

In obedience to God’s command, Hosea pursued Gomer and accepted her as God restored the covenant relationship. Likewise, the Session should encourage the offended spouse to offer forgiveness and reconciliation with the hope of drawing the offending spouse back to right relationship in the marriage.

Pastors who become aware of potential divorce situations within the church—either through the parties involved or from outside sources—should encourage both partners to seek Christian marriage counseling, either from the church staff or from other qualified counselors. God’s love, forgiveness, and healing power should be emphasized, especially where the offending spouse (who committed the marital unfaithfulness) is repentant and the offended spouse is reluctant to forgive and unwilling to continue in the marriage (emphasis original).<sup>39</sup>

Marital repair *must* be pursued, and forgiveness aiming at marital restoration *should* be offered and *should* be the emphasis of pastoral intervention – the position paper is entirely reflective of the 1959 version of the WCF. Reconciliation and forgiveness are good things and pastors should consider whether that path ought to be taken. But this is a far cry from the 1647 version of WCF 24.5, “In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.” The Westminster Divines were

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, throughout.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

not anti-reconciliation, nor did they believe that adultery mandated divorce. But the 1959 version, and the EPC’s position paper based upon it, turns the innocent party into the perpetrator of sin. Under the 1647 version, the innocent party would be free to divorce the offending party (without counseling or mediation) even if the offending party repented and desired reconciliation. Under the 1959 version, the Session would have grounds to pursue disciplinary charges for lack of repentance against the innocent party *but not the adulterer*. If the offending party pled repentance, genuine or otherwise, but the innocent party wanted to divorce without attempting reconciliation, the church would be totally within its confessional authority to excommunicate the innocent party for an unrepentant refusal to forgive. After all, the innocent party divorced their spouse when the sin was not “unrepented-of” and the relationship, in the eyes of the offending party and the church, not “irremediable.”

This is absurd, but has famously happened numerous times over the last few decades in the broad Reformed world. This becomes more complicated when the subject of willful desertion is considered. WLC 135-136 state that the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment requires that we preserve our own lives and the lives of others, which means the reality of domestic abuse require us to be able to remove ourselves and others from an abusive setting. This is, in effect, willful desertion by the abusive partner by forcing the victim to withdraw.<sup>40</sup> The EPC has affirmed that domestic abuse is a violation of the marriage covenant,<sup>41</sup> and has stated that physical abuse in some situations may constitute grounds for divorce.<sup>42</sup> The ambiguity of the 1959 version of WCF 24.5’s “persistent” and “irremediable” litmus, along with the reasonable interpretive application in the EPC’s position paper requiring efforts at reconciliation, runs the risk of endangering of the innocent party. The 1647 version of WCF 24.6 states that only “willful desertion as can no way be remedied...by the civil magistrate” is a ground for divorce. This provides a clearer picture of how to deal with the issue of domestic abuse and divorce. The church should not be in the business of adjudicating physical abuse. The civil government has a role to play here,<sup>43</sup> and that role should have priority over the church in determining the innocent party’s safety and the remedying of it.

While the 1959 version of WCF 24.5 with its emphasis on reconciliation and maintaining the relationship may come from a good impulse, it is not ultimately pro-marriage, but anti-victim.

WCF 1647	WCF 1959
WCF 24.6: ... wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case.	WCF 24.7: Divorced persons should give prayerful thought to discover if God’s vocation for them is to remain unmarried, since one failure in this realm raises serious questions as

<sup>40</sup> John Frame develops this more here: <https://frame-poythress.org/recent-reflections-on-divorce/>.

<sup>41</sup> See the pastoral letter “Domestic Abuse” adopted by the 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 1996. The pastoral letter on “Human Sexuality” adopted by the 38<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 2018 has a comparable section on sexual abuse.

<sup>42</sup> Position Paper “Divorce and Remarriage”, page 7.

<sup>43</sup> Both the pastoral letters “Domestic Abuse” and “Human Sexuality” state that pastors and Sessions have a moral responsibility to report abuse to law enforcement. However, the recommendations of the pastoral letter “Domestic Abuse” focus on the church’s role in arbitrating the situation. For example, the Session should, “Intervene in domestic abuse situations, balancing the need for biblical reconciliation and the preservation of the marriage with physical safety and protection.” This is bad counsel. The priority should be given to physical safety every time; failure to do so violates the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment and withholds love from our neighbor.



	to the rightness and wisdom of undertaking another union.
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The difference between these statements encapsulates the difference in values between the Westminster Assembly and 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Under the 1647 version, divorce and its effects are to be handled publicly, that is, not according to private judgment but the good order the church in its sanctioning of marriage. This is to protect people from going astray after their own ideas rather than the Bible's teaching on the subject. By contrast, the 1959 version has the individual give "prayerful thought" about whether to get remarried. Well. Apparently, the church's contribution to the institution of marriage includes precluding itself from speaking into an individual's remarriage. The 1959 WCF 24.7 is instructing exactly what the 1647 version of WCF 24.6 warns against.

Continuing in its established pattern, the 1959 WCF 24.7 does not distinguish between offending and innocent parties in a divorce. All those who have divorced need to prayerfully consider whether they should get remarried, "since the failure in this realm raises serious questions." It would be interesting to read what the PCUS thought the Bible taught those "serious questions" to be for those who were deserted or whose spouse committed adultery. The 1959 version of WCF 24 is unwilling to state that specific acts are sinful, sinful acts where one spouse victimizes the other leaving the victimized spouse free to pursue divorce. This unwillingness leads to lumping all divorcees into the same moral category, with the same moral considerations.

The 1959 version of WCF 24 suffers from ambiguity and imprecision, which in practice allows for both too much laxity and strictness. It also deviates from the historic Reformed tradition in ways that the 1647 version does not. The 1647 version provides both doctrinal clarity and ministerial freedom of views in areas where the 1959 version falls short. The EPC should revert to the pre-1903 version of WCF 24 by constitutional amendment.

### The Pope and the Head of the Church

The original 1647 version of WCF 25.6 read, “There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof;<sup>44</sup> but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalts himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God.”

This was amended by the PCUSA in 1903 to read, “The Lord Jesus Christ is the only head of the Church, and the claim of any man to be the vicar of Christ and the head of the Church is unscriptural, without warrant in fact, and is a usurpation dishonoring to the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>45</sup>

When the EPC adopted its version of the Westminster Standards in 1984, WCF 25.6 was rewritten to state simply, “There is no other head of the church than the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>46</sup> The motivation for this amendment is not recorded in the minutes of the EPC, but it is reasonable to surmise a few factors. The 1647 version could easily be seen as going too far, requiring subscription to something that is not only unessential to the system of doctrine contained in the scriptures, but something initially included as a reaction to a particular social setting (i.e. Reformation-era Britain) rather than a confession of what scripture teaches. I suspect very few EPC ministers, either in 1984 or the present day, would be willing to call the Pope the Antichrist. Deleting the original clause would not require the minority of EPC ministers who believe the Pope is the Antichrist to take an exception, but retaining it would likely require the majority to take exceptions.

The 1903 version was probably then seen as unnecessary: as long as we affirm that Jesus alone is head of the church, there is no need for additional statements condemning someone who asserts that they are the head of the church. This is speculation, but I still think likely.

There are a few diagnostic questions that need to be asked. Is the current EPC version an adequate confession of scripture’s teaching? Is the thrust of either the 1647 or 1903 version (that it is a sinful affront to Christ to claim headship of the church) an adequate confession of scripture’s teaching? If the teaching of the 1647 or 1903 versions of WCF 25.6 are biblical, does the EPC do a disservice to the system of doctrine contained in the scripture by eliminating the majority of those version’s content?

Scripture teaches, and our Confession affirms, that Jesus alone is head of the church (Ephesians 1:22, Colossians 1:18). But scripture also teaches that to claim a position as head of the church (either permanently or temporarily) is sinful. What characterizes the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10 is his self-exaltation in Christ’s place (2 Thessalonians 2:4), taking for himself the seat of God over his temple, the place of worship.

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<sup>44</sup> The OPC and PCA reverted to the pre-1903 version of WCF 25.6, but deleted everything coming after this footnote.

<sup>45</sup> The PCUS adopted essentially the same amendment, with the ending reworded as, “...is without warrant in fact or in Scripture, even anti-Christian, a usurpation dishonoring to the Lord Jesus Christ.”

<sup>46</sup> *Minutes of the Fourth General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church*, 4-23, page 13. See Appendix G.IV., Motion #3, page 178. It is odd that there is no reference to this amendment in the ‘Afterward on the Texts’ in the EPC’s official version of the WCF, which does include references to a number of other relevant EPC amendments.

What is sinful about that action is not just the impudence and the idolatry, but the attempt to supplant Jesus in his position of honor over the church. The gospel logic of Ephesians 1:22 and Colossians 1:18 is that Jesus is head over all things, king of his church, and that he has executed that office by his death and resurrection. It is a usurpation of Christ's office to not just claim to be head of the church, but to act as if you are head of the church. This is the Protestant complaint against Roman Catholicism: the Roman Catholic Church explicitly affirms that Jesus is the head of the church<sup>47</sup> but that the Pope is head of the episcopal college, as Peter was head of the apostles.<sup>48</sup> However, the Pope functions in the roles that scripturally Jesus alone possesses as head of the church: "For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered."<sup>49</sup> The papal power, exercised as head of the college of bishops, over the whole church, is expressed and executed in this way:

The power which they exercise personally in the name of Christ, is proper, ordinary, and immediate, although its exercise is ultimately controlled by the supreme authority of the Church. But the bishops should not be thought of as vicars of the Pope. His ordinary and immediate authority over the whole Church does not annul, but on the contrary confirms and defends that of the bishops. Their authority must be exercised in communion with the whole Church under the guidance of the Pope.<sup>50</sup>

The bishops exercise authority over the church and receive that authority from Christ, mediated and confirmed by the Pope, Christ's vicar of the church. Compare with WLC 45, "How doth Christ execute the office of king? Christ executeth the office of king in...giving [his people, the church] officers, laws, and censures by which he visibly governs them..." This is based on the teaching expressed in biblical passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11-12. Christ is head of the church, and governs his people through his officers by his word. His officers do not find their legitimacy mediated through someone operating as Christ's steward.

While we may not be living in the specific social circumstances of the Reformation, Roman Catholicism is still prominent in our culture. The theological challenges of the Reformation have not evaporated over time, nor has the prominence of Roman Catholicism faded in America since 1984.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See in particular #792-795 in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, #880-887.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, #882. Compare with the Catholic Encyclopedia (1913): "...the title Vicar of Christ is more expressive of his supreme headship of the Church on earth, which he bears in virtue of the commission of Christ and with vicarial power derived from Him."

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, #895.

<sup>51</sup> There is diversity in the EPC over how to approach the issue of evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism. EPC member and well known church historian Mark Noll was a formal endorser of the 1994 statement 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' (<https://www.firstthings.com/article/1994/05/evangelicals-catholics-together-the-christian-mission-in-the-third-millennium>). This statement prompted a response in the 1996 'Cambridge Declaration', an event which in turn reconstituted the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. The 'Cambridge Declaration' was signed by the EPC's Rob Norris and Luder Whitlock ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge\\_Declaration#1996\\_signatories](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Declaration#1996_signatories)). Regardless of where EPC elders land on this spectrum, what is clear is that Roman Catholicism ecclesiological differences with Reformed churches has not ebbed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, nor has there been a change of the biblical language relied upon by the Westminster Assembly.

The current scandals of the Roman Catholic church are directly tied to its hierarchy, including the Pope, which provides a missional opportunity for a distinct and firm Protestant position.

This is worth rehearsing in order to remind us that i) The fact that the Roman Catholic Church affirms that Jesus is head of the church does not mean their practice reflects the Reformed (biblical) understanding of that position. Yet in good faith, a Roman Catholic could affirm the EPC's version of WCF 25.6. ii) The social-theological distance between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries on this issue is not as great as we may think. iii) How an officer of the church exercises their authority can reflect a dangerously malnourished understanding of Christ's headship of the church. To confuse pastoral leadership derived from, and submissive to the headship of Christ as expressed in scripture, with pastoral authoritarianism in a church, violates this principle as much as the Papal Office.

It is this third reminder that has been more relevant in recent years. It is now fashionable for pastors to describe themselves as "head pastor" in a way that goes beyond "head of staff." Pastoral authoritarianism is not limited to Roman Catholicism, and has been a recurring problem among Reformed Protestants over the last decade.<sup>52</sup> Male headship has been cited on numerous occasions (including by EPC pastors) to argue that men alone should be senior pastors. What is alarming is not the view on male-only ordination, but that often this view is grounded in the pastor being head of the church.

Too often in Protestant congregations the pastors declare that Jesus alone is head of the church while practicing something entirely different. The pastoral model presented in 1 Peter 5:1-3 has too frequently given way to a domineering approach. This is a lethal threat to the spiritual health of the people in our congregations.

Several questions need to be answered in evaluating the EPC's version of WCF 25.6. Scripture teaches that it is sinful to claim headship over the church, or to practice pastoral authority in a way that is a supplanting of Christ's kingly headship. This biblical teaching is reflected in both the 1647 and 1903 versions of WCF 25.6, but not the EPC's. The teaching is socially relevant since Roman Catholicism is very much present, and because there is a growing trend of pastoral practices that operate as if the under-shepherds of the church were its head.

But there is a simple, straightforward case to be made that the EPC's version of WCF 25.6 is an inadequate representation of the system of doctrine taught in the scriptures, whereas the 1647 and 1903 versions are more faithful. Any pastoral candidate taking exception to the statement, "And the claim of any man to be the head of the Church is unscriptural and is a usurpation dishonoring to the Lord Jesus Christ," should be barred from ministry. Anyone unwilling to say that it is unscriptural and sinful to claim the headship of the church should not be in a position to shepherd the church. Such an immediate doctrinal disqualification is indicative that the doctrine is an important aspect of the Bible's teaching.

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<sup>52</sup> In 2018, the PCUSA affirmed that their Stated Clerk is the "continuing ecclesial officer and Head of Communion," naming the Stated Clerk as 'constitutional and spiritual leader' for the life and witness of the church, giving the Stated Clerk ex officio membership on all agencies of the church, and giving the Stated Clerk consultative authority prior to the consideration for election of any candidate for chief executive of any of the PC(USA)'s six agencies," <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2018/6/29/highlights-actions-223rd-general-assembly-2018-150/>. This is eerily like how the Pope is not technically head of the church, but in reality, functions that way. The Stated Clerk of the PCUSA has responsibilities, that while not equitable to the Pope's, should not be invested in a single individual rather than a court of the church. This danger is certainly not limited to the PCUSA among Protestants.

The EPC's Confession should include the biblical declaration that claiming headship of the church is sinful, particularly since it is the historic position and confession of the Reformed tradition. Currently, the EPC's version of the WCF is the only one in the world not containing some variation of this declaration. The EPC should do either one of two things with WCF 25.6. The first option is to adopt by constitutional amendment the 1903 version of WCF 25.6. This precise version is held by the PCUSA and ECO, but it also reflects the spirit of the 1647 version held by other confessional Presbyterians. Compared to the 1647 version it simultaneously allows for more freedom (it does not commit the EPC to teaching the Pope is the Antichrist) while having more expansive application (it more expressly touches on anyone positioning themselves as head of the church). The second option is to adopt by constitutional amendment the 1647 version of WCF 25.6 as held by the OPC and PCA. This version of WCF 25.6 is confessed by the OPC and PCA, and is essentially the version confessed by the ARP. The EPC would become consistent with the great majority of American confessional Presbyterians. Adopting the version as held by the OPC and PCA would also avoid the unnecessary stumbling block of identifying the Pope as the Antichrist, though it would not be as broadly robust as adopting the 1903 version

### Persons Authorized to Administer the Sacraments

In its 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 1986, the EPC amended the sacramental and pastoral theology of the Westminster Standards.<sup>53</sup> Specifically WCF 27.4 was changed by adding the word “Ordinarily” to the beginning of this sentence: “neither [sacrament] may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.” WCF 28.2 and WLC 176 were subsequently changed along similar lines, WCF 28.4: “[baptism is be administered] ordinarily by a lawfully called minister of the gospel.” WLC 176 was changed from, “[the sacraments] are to be dispensed by ministers of the gospel, and by none other” to, “[the sacraments] are ordinarily to be administered by ministers of the gospel.”

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms had previously taught that only ordained ministers of the word were to administrate the sacraments. The EPC’s amendments were intended to free churches to authorize ruling elders to administer the sacraments.<sup>54</sup> While the EPC has adopted a number of restrictions and guidelines for when and how ruling elders and non-ordained Christians are permitted to administer the sacraments,<sup>55</sup> the confessional position of the EPC is that scripture does not restrict the authority to administrate the sacraments to the elders of the church, much less lawfully called ministers of the word.

This puts the EPC in a unique position among Presbyterian and Reformed churches. While the EPC may be the only denomination in the world requiring subscription in the case of its revisions to WCF 24 and 25.6, as well as its additions of WCF 34 and 35, at least the PCUSA and ECO include these changes in their respective confessional collections. These sacramental revisions are entirely unique to the EPC, meaning that not only is the EPC the only church that requires its ministers to subscribe to these changes, but is the only church whose confessional system includes these changes at all.

But the EPC is not simply out of step with our sister churches who hold to the Westminster Standards – we are out of step with the entirety of the Reformed tradition:

The Bohemian Confession of Faith (1535), article 9, “...ministers of the Church, to whom the administration of the word and sacraments is entrusted...”

Catechism of the Church of Geneva (1542), Q&A 366, “Q: Does the administration both of baptism and of the Supper belong indiscriminately to all? A: By no means. It is confined to those to whom the office of teaching has been committed. For the two things, viz., to feed the Church with the doctrine of piety and administer the sacrament, are united together by an indissoluble tie.”

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<sup>53</sup> *Minutes of the 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church*, 6-25, page 28.

<sup>54</sup> The initial amendment was originally part of a denominational paper entitled, “Ruling Elders and the Sacraments,” *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> For example, see BoG 9-11, ‘The Ruling Elder as Commissioned Pastor’ and BoW 3-1.A, ‘The administration of the sacraments.’

The Scots Confession (1560), chapter 22, “That sacraments be rightly ministered, we judge two things requisite: the one, that they be ministered by lawful ministers, whom we affirm to be only they that are appointed to the preaching of the word.”

The Belgic Confession of Faith (1561), chapter 30, “There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments. There should also be elders and deacons, along with the pastors.”

The Second Helvetic Confession, (1564), chapter 18, “The duties of ministers are various; yet for the most part they are restricted to two, in which all the rest are comprehended: to the teaching of the Gospel of Christ, and to the proper administration of the sacraments.”

The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, (1571), article 23, “It is not lawful for any man to take upon him the office of publick preaching, or ministering the Sacraments in the Congregation, before he be lawfully called, and sent to execute the same.”

The Irish Articles of Religion (1615), article 71, “It is not lawful for any man to take upon him the office of public preaching or ministering the Sacraments in the Church, unless he be first lawfully called and sent to execute the same.”

The Savoy Declaration (1658), 27.4, “neither [sacrament] may be dispensed by any but a minister of the Word lawfully called.”

The EPC is an isolated position in the Reformed tradition on this issue. Four reasons were given as the basis for this confessional revision in 1986:

#### Grounds

1. It is our conviction that there is no Biblical warrant from restricting the administration of the sacraments to ordained Ministers. On the contrary, Scripture indicates that Philip, a Deacon, administered the sacrament of baptism to the Ethiopian eunuch. Further, Acts 2:42 indicates that the early Christian Church observed the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper each time a congregation assembled and there is no evidence that an Apostle was always present to administer it.
2. We can find no command or instruction in the New Testament that the sacraments were to be administered only by an ordained Minister.
3. There are times in the life of the Church when a Pastor is not available and there is an ongoing need for the sacraments to be available. For example, when the pulpit is vacant and a supply Pastor is not available, such need exists. Undoubtedly there are also times when it would be advantageous in our mission efforts for a Ruling Elder to be allowed to administer the sacraments.
4. We concur with the statement in the **Book of Worship**, Section 3-1, which says, “The power revealed in the sacraments does not reside in them or in the one administering

them, but in the work of the Holy Spirit and in the promise of God who gives benefits to those who worthily receive them.” (emphasis original).<sup>56</sup>

The grounds of the EPC’s position fail to engage with Reformed tradition’s understanding of the Bible’s teaching. I will address them, though not in the same order they are stated.

The 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly asserted, “Acts 2:42 indicates that the early Christian Church observed the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper each time a congregation assembled and there is no evidence that an Apostle was always present to administer it.” There are at least five problems with this statement.

*First*, arguments from silence work both ways. To state that there is no evidence that the apostles were always present begs the question. It could just as easily be asked, “Is there any evidence that they were absent?” No, the Bible does not explicitly teach that they were absent, just as it does not explicitly teach that they were present. The former happens to be affirmed because it was convenient for the report.

*Second*, Acts 2:42 is the first verse after Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, and begins by saying that the young church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” It is reasonable to conclude from the immediate context that the church is listening to the apostles themselves. This is all the more likely when it is considered that New Testament (i.e. the apostles’ teaching, written) was not yet composed and the apostles themselves were the only ones who actually had the apostles’ teaching. This seems to be the idea in Acts 6:2 when the apostles need to select assistants so they can remain devoted to teaching the young church themselves.

*Third*, even if the apostles themselves were not present, being devoted to their teaching would require someone to verbally teach apostolic doctrine since it was not yet written. This means that there would be people authorized to administrate apostolic teaching; that is, there would be duly called ministers of the word present. This is the very class of people the WCF asserts are required for proper administration of the sacraments.

*Fourth*, Acts 2:42 does not say that every time the church gathered they observed the Lord’s Supper, nor does it say that in the similarly worded 2:46. It says that the church was devoted to the breaking of bread, not that this devotion expressed itself in daily or weekly partaking of the sacrament. It cannot be confidently concluded from this passage that every time they gathered they observed the sacrament, and therefore cannot be asserted that it is unreasonable for the apostles to be present every time they partook of the Supper.

*Fifth*, Acts 2:42 does not say that the church was devoted to the Lord’s Supper, but to the breaking of bread. The Reformed tradition has been divided over whether this is a reference to the sacrament or to physical support for fellow Christians (as was the issue in Acts 6). Calvin states, “Some do think that *κοινωνία*, doth signify the celebrating of the Holy Supper; but I do rather agree to those others who think that the same is meant by the breaking of bread. For *κοινωνία*, unless it have somewhat added unto it, is never found in this sense; therefore, I do rather refer it unto mutual

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<sup>56</sup> *Minutes of the 6<sup>th</sup> GA*, 6-25.



society and fellowship, unto alms, and unto other duties of brotherly fellowship.”<sup>57</sup> The EPC’s interpretation here is too questionable a grounds to reject the WCF’s sacramental teaching.

The EPC’s report grounds its reasoning in Philip administering baptism although he was not a minister of the word, but rather a deacon. What the report appears to be unaware of is that the Reformed tradition, including the Westminster Assembly, has taught that Philip held the office of evangelist,<sup>58</sup> which was part of the apostolic era. While a contemporary interpretation of the term ‘evangelist’ tends towards “those who share the gospel of Jesus with non-Christians, and that can be any Christian and should be all Christians,” the Reformers generally took the term to denote a distinct office of the church. Ephesians 4:11 was understood to be teaching that alongside the foundational office of apostle was a similarly foundational, lieutenant office of evangelist. Calvin states,

Next to [the apostles] come the *Evangelists*, who were closely allied in the nature of their office, but held an inferior rank. To this class belonged Timothy and others; for, while Paul mentions them along with himself in the salutations of his epistles, he does not speak of them as his companions in the apostleship, but claims this name as peculiarly his own. The services in which the Lord employed them were auxiliary to those of the apostles, to whom they were next in rank (emphasis original).<sup>59</sup>

The office of evangelist was an auxiliary position to the apostles, dedicated to preaching the gospel. Outside of Ephesians 4:11 the term is used twice more in the Bible. One instance is in 2 Timothy 4:5 when Paul instructs Timothy to do the work of an evangelist. Calvin comments on this,

*Do the work of an Evangelist* That is, ‘Do that which belongs to an evangelist.’ Whether he denotes generally by this term any ministers of the gospel, or whether this was a special office, is doubtful; but I am more inclined to the second opinion, because from Ephesians

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<sup>57</sup> Calvin’s *Commentary on Acts 1-13*, online here: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom36.html>. Pages 89-90 on Acts 2:42. Similarly, commenting Acts 2:46, “For whereas some do think that in this place, by breaking of bread is meant the Holy Supper, it seemeth to me that Luke meant no such thing. He signifieth, therefore, unto us, that they used to eat together, and that thriftily” (page 95).

<sup>58</sup> This is not to be confused with the EPC’s polity, which allows someone to be called as a Teaching Elder in the role of evangelist.

<sup>59</sup> Calvin’s *Commentary on Galatians-Ephesians*, online here: <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom41.pdf>. Page 233 on Ephesians 4:11. In Calvin’s *Institutes* 4.3.4 he similarly states,

By Evangelists, I mean those who, while inferior in rank to the apostles, were next them in office, and even acted as their substitutes. Such were Luke, Timothy, Titus, and the like; perhaps also, the seventy (disciples whom our Saviour appointed in the second place to the apostles, (Luke 10:1.)

According to this interpretation, which appears to me consonant both to the words and the meaning of Paul, those three functions were not instituted in the Church to be perpetual, but only to endure so long as churches were to be formed where none previously existed, or at least where churches were to be transferred from Moses to Christ; although I deny not, that afterward God occasionally raised up Apostles, or at least Evangelists, in their stead, as has been done in our time. For such were needed to bring back the Church from the revolt of Antichrist. The office I nevertheless call extraordinary, because it has no place in churches duly constituted.

4:11 it is clearly evident that this was an intermediate class between apostles and pastors, so that the evangelists ranked as assistants next to the apostles (emphasis original).<sup>60</sup>

Timothy has been called to a specific office, and Paul is urging him to remain steadfast in the calling of preaching the gospel. This interpretation of 2 Timothy 4:5 received confessional endorsement in the Swiss Reformed churches. Chapter 18 of the Second Helvetic Confession states, “The writers of the history of the Gospel were called Evangelists; but they also were heralds of the Gospel of Christ; as Paul also commended Timothy: ‘Do the work of an evangelist’ (II Tim. 4:5).”

The final time the term ‘evangelist’ is used in the Bible is in Acts 21:8, where Paul enters the house of “Philip the evangelist.” Calvin comments,

When he came to Cesarea, they lodged with Philip, whom he calleth an Evangelist, though he were one of the seven deacons, as we may see in the sixth chapter (Acts 6:5). By this we may easily gather, that that deaconship was an office which continued but for a time; because it had not otherwise been lawful for Philip to forsake Jerusalem, and to go to Cesarea. And in this place he is set before us, not as a voluntary forsaker of his office, but as one to whom a greater and more excellent charge was committed. The evangelists, in my judgment, were in the midst between apostles and doctors. For it was a function next to the apostles to preach the gospel in all places, and not to have any certain place of abode; only the degree of honor was inferior. For when Paul describeth the order of the Church, (Ephesians 4:11) he doth so put them after the apostles, that he showeth that they have more room given them where they may teach than the pastors, who are tied to certain places. Therefore, Philip did for a time exercise the office of a deacon at Jerusalem, whom the Church thought afterward to be a meet man to whom the treasure of the gospel should be committed.<sup>61</sup>

Philip may have been called as a deacon in Acts 6, but has since been called to the office of evangelist. It is possible that Philip may have held both offices simultaneously (e.g. Peter was both an apostle and an elder, 1 Peter 5:1), but what Calvin is pointing out here is that Philip’s call to the office of evangelist was not tied to a certain location since Philip began in Jerusalem and was now in Caesera. Philip as an evangelist was called to preach the gospel over an extended area, which is precisely what he did in Acts 8:40 until he arrived in Caesera. As someone called to the preach the word, Philip was authorized to administer the sacraments, which is exactly what he did when he began his itinerant, evangelist ministry in Acts 8.

It was this understanding of the office of evangelist that the Westminster Assembly and its members embraced. The Assembly identified the office of evangelist as being extraordinary and ceasing in the apostolic era. Westminster Divine George Walker stated it thus, “The Apostles and Evangelists should be extraordinarily called...But after the publishing of the Gospel by them to all the world, and their writing of the holy Scriptures...there is no more need of any such extraordinary calling and

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<sup>60</sup> Calvin’s *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, online here: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.html>. Page 212 on 2 Timothy 4:5.

<sup>61</sup> Calvin’s *Commentary on Acts 14-28*, found online here: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom37.html>. Page 210, on Acts 21:8.

gifts.”<sup>62</sup> Among the features of the office of evangelist, the Assembly listed “deriving his doctrine from the apostles,” indicating a support role to the apostles, as well as “not being bound to this or that place.”<sup>63</sup> This identification made it into the Assembly’s *Form of Presbyterian Church-Government*.<sup>64</sup>

There can be a diversity of opinions in the EPC over whether evangelist is a distinct office of the church, and if so, whether it ceased in the apostolic era. However, the argument that we should allow non-pastors to administrate the sacraments because Philip did, and he was only a deacon,<sup>65</sup> is to ignore the very biblical, Reformed tradition on that point. Ultimately, the EPC’s biblical ground for allowing non-pastors to administrate the sacraments is far more wanting than the historic, biblical position of the WCF.

The 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly cited the EPC’s Book of Worship as a friendly partner in affirming that the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend on the one administering them, but upon the work of the Holy Spirit applying the promises of God to those who receive the sacraments in faith. This confuses the issue: only pastors are to administrate the sacraments because that is how God has established the order of things by his word. The question of legitimate administration is not the same as the efficacy of the sacraments. The EPC’s Book of Worship is essentially paraphrasing WCF 27.3, “The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.”

The WCF was not contradicting itself when one paragraph later it stated that only lawfully called ministers were to administer the sacraments. The sacraments receive their efficacy by divine establishment, not their human administration. If someone not legitimately called to the ministry of the word otherwise legitimately administrates the sacrament, the sacrament remains valid, though the administrator sinned in their actions.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *A Model of the Government of the Church Under the Gospel*, online here: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A96941.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>. Page 8.

<sup>63</sup> Spear, Wayne R. *Covenanted Uniformity in Religion: The Influence of the Scottish Commissioners on the Ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013, page 87.

<sup>64</sup> “The officers which Christ hath appointed for the edification of his church, and the perfecting of the saints, are, some extraordinary, as apostles, evangelists, and prophets, which are ceased. Others ordinary and perpetual, as pastors, teachers, and other church-governors, and deacons (emphasis added)”. *The Government and Order of the Scottish Church* states essentially the same thing, “The Offices of Apostles, Evangelists, and Prophets were extraordinary, and continued in the Christian Church, so long as by the Will of God, it was needfull for the well of the Church; who although in regard of their order, degree, manner of Ministration, and the places, which they did hold, which is called *successio in gradum eundem*. They have properly none to succeed them (emphasis added).”

<sup>65</sup> It is worth noting that Acts 6 never identifies the seven as deacons. John Collins makes a strong argument that Luke uses the term throughout the book of Acts to refer to the ministry of the word, which is the work both Philip and Stephen are recorded doing. The summary of the argument can be found here: <https://margmowczko.com/the-ministry-of-the-seven-men-in-acts-6/>.

<sup>66</sup> To argue otherwise is to embrace the Donatist heresy. See Calvin’s *Institutes*, 4.15.16.

One of the grounds cited by the 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly is that there will be times when there is no minister of the word available, but there is a need for the sacraments to be administered. Therefore, we should allow non-pastors to administer to the sacraments. This basis for amending our Confession is troubling.

*First*, if there is no minister of the word available to administer the sacraments, who is preaching? Either someone not called to the ministry of the word is preaching, which violates our confessional system (e.g. WLC 158),<sup>67</sup> or there is someone present who is authorized to do both.

*Second*, if the Bible teaches that only ministers of the word are to administer the sacraments, and none are available, then the fact that there is need does not in itself give the church permission to violate God's word. While this may describe the urgency in righting an alleged error, it does not establish a warrant for changing our doxological practice. The EPC would be well served to consider the patience and diligence of the Scottish Covenanters, who waited 16 years between ministers serving in their churches.<sup>68</sup> The desperation of the situation does not legitimize illegitimate practice. This is the thrust of Calvin's argument in 4.15.20 of his *Institutes*, where he decries the laity administering baptism when a minister is not present.

*Third*, the proper handling of God's word is still required when administering the sacraments. The word may never become disconnected from the sacraments, not only in the words of institution, but also in the instruction preceding sacramental administration. The EPC's argument does not consider that the ministry of the sacraments requires ministry of the word. In contending that in the absence of a minister of the word (i.e. someone called and qualified to preach the word), it is implied that there can still be someone qualified to administer the sacraments. This is essence an exhibition of a willingness to accept a meager ministry of the word. The confessional doctrine of requiring ministers of the word to administrate the sacraments reflects a biblically solid principle: if there are not qualified ministers available, the solution is not having an unqualified ministry of word and sacrament.

The final stated basis for the EPC's revision to the Westminster Standards is the drafting committee's inability to find a command in the New Testament that only ordained ministers were to administrate the sacraments. This "ground" is, bluntly, an admission of a lack of due diligence, not an absence of biblical teaching on the subject.

It is true that there is no explicit statement of, "Only ordained Teaching Elders may lawfully dispense the sacraments." But the theology of the Reformed tradition is quite clear: the ministry of the sacraments cannot be separated from the ministry of the word, so those who are called to the ministry of the word (which is explicitly limited, e.g. 1 Timothy 5:17, James 3:1) are the ones called to sacramental ministry. All the previously quoted Reformed confessions make this point: the ministry of the word and sacrament are the same. Question 367 of the Genevan Catechism directly addressed this subject, "Q: Can you prove this to me by the testimony of Scripture? A: Christ gave special commandment to the Apostles to baptize. In the celebration of the Supper he ordered us to

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<sup>67</sup> The BoG does have allowances for Ruling Elders to preach if no Teaching Elder is available (e.g. BoG 18-3.M), but a Session that is able to temporarily handle the ministry of the word should be mature enough to wait until the Presbytery can provide a Teaching Elder to administer the sacraments.

<sup>68</sup> See: <http://www.scottishreformedpresbyterianseminary.org/history-of-the-reformed-presbyterian-church/>.

follow his example. And the Evangelists relate that he himself in dispensing it, performed the office of a public minister. (Matthew 28:19; Luke 22:19.)”

Calvin states that,

It is here also pertinent to observe, that it is improper for private individuals to take upon themselves the administration of baptism; for it, as well as the dispensation of the Supper, is part of the ministerial office. For Christ did not give command to any men or women whatever to baptise, but to those whom he had appointed apostles. And when, in the administration of the Supper (Matt. 28:19), he ordered his disciples to do what they had seen him do, (he having done the part of a legitimate dispenser,) he doubtless meant that in this they should imitate his example.<sup>69</sup>

The commands left by Jesus at his ascension (to baptize and teach all that Christ had commanded) are first properly given to the apostles. This is made most clear by Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1, where he says, “This is how one should regard us, as ministers/servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Calvin’s comment on this is clarifying,

By this [Paul] intimates, that [the apostolic] office extends no farther than this, that they are stewards of the mysteries of God...It is an honorable distinction that he confers upon the gospel when he terms its contents the mysteries of God. But as the sacraments are connected with these mysteries as appendages, it follows, that those who have the charge of administering the word are the authorized stewards of them also.<sup>70</sup>

“The mysteries of God” are the content of the gospel, the substance of which is Christ. The apostles are ministers of that gospel, meaning that they are charged as its caretakers by proclamation. Since the sacraments correspond to the preached word as exhibitions of the gospel, those to whom the stewardship of ministry of the word is given is also given stewardship of the sacramental ministry. The logic of Ephesians 4:4-12 is that the foundational ministry of the apostles is continued on by pastors preaching the word and administering the sacraments. The sacramental ministry is tied to the ministry of teaching, which Jesus gave not to Christians on an individual basis, but to the church by its officers.

The new covenant, of which Christ is the substance, is dispensed in the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments (e.g., Matthew 28:18-20, 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, 2 Corinthians 3:7-11). The preaching of the word is a declaration of what Christ offers the sinner by the new covenant in his blood. The sacraments are signs and seals of that same new covenant. The sacraments are visible depictions of what the preached word declares about Christ’s mediatorial work. They are therefore the preached word made visible by divine appointment.<sup>71</sup> In Calvin’s words, “Wherefore, let it be a fixed point, that the office of the sacraments differs not from the

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<sup>69</sup> Institutes, 4.15.20.

<sup>70</sup> Calvin’s *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, found online here: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.html>. Page 120, on 1 Corinthians 4:1.

<sup>71</sup> See this article by J.V. Fesko of Westminster Seminary, California for a helpful summary: <https://www.wscal.edu/resource-center/the-sacraments-as-visible-words>.

word of God; and this is to hold forth and offer Christ to us, and, in him, the treasures of heavenly grace.”<sup>72</sup>

This teaching saturates the Westminster Standards. The covenant of grace in Christ’s blood is dispensed by the preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments (WCF 7.6, WLC 35). The preaching of the word and sacraments are the outward means by which Christ communicates the benefits of redemption (WLC 154). The word of God is only to be preached by those who have been lawfully called and appointed (WLC 158). Christ has appointed ministers of his word to administer the Lord’s Supper (WLC 169, WCF 29.3).<sup>73</sup>

George Gillespie, Scottish Commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, was clear about the application of this, “The power of Order alone shall, make the difference betwixt the Pastor and the ruling Elder; for by the power of Order, the Pastor doth preach the Word, minister the Sacraments, pray in publike, blesse the Congregation, celebrate marriage, which the ruling Elder cannot.”<sup>74</sup> Only those elders who have been called to the ministry of the word may administrate the sacraments. He restates this in another work as something that even his ecclesiological opponents agree on, “That the Ministry of the Word and the Administration of the Sacraments of the New Testament, Baptisme and the Lords Supper, are standing Ordinances instituted by God himself, to continue in the Church to the end of the World. That such as Administer the Word and Sacraments, ought to be duely called and ordained thereunto.”<sup>75</sup>

The amendments the EPC has made to our confessional system do not express a robust understanding of scripture, much less any meaningful engagement with our fathers in the faith. What they do show is a disconnect in our denomination’s understanding of the relationship between the ministry of the word and ministry of the sacraments. The irony of this is that the grounds cited by the 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly for amending the WCF could be cited as grounds for rejecting the amendment that was actually made. The statement that “ordinarily” the sacraments ought to be administered by ministers of the word would fall short of the ‘standard’ the 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly used to amend the confession. Where in the Bible does it explicitly say that “ordinarily” the sacraments need to be applied by a pastor? What about Philip? If it is unreasonable to think the apostles were always present in Acts 2, then how can we say the “ordinary” practice was pastors administering the sacraments? There is a reason the EPC’s official copy of the WCF cites no scripture for these revisions.

The EPC is out of sync with the teaching of the Westminster Standards, the Reformed tradition, and the system of doctrine contained in the scriptures on this point. It should constitutionally amend these revisions back to their pre-1903 state.

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<sup>72</sup> *Institutes*, 4.14.17.

<sup>73</sup> These remain, unedited, in the EPC’s version of the Westminster Standards. Trying to edit out a fundamental aspect of the WCF’s teaching in piecemeal fashion leaves holes like this final example.

<sup>74</sup> *An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland in Respect to Ruling Elders*, which can be found online here: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A42758.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext/>. Page 15.

<sup>75</sup> *CXI Propositions Concerning the Ministries and Government of the Church*, which can be found online here: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A42763.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext/>.

### Chapters 34 & 35: The Holy Spirit and the Gospel of the Love of God and Missions

Part of the 1903 PCUSA revisions of the WCF involved the addition of these two chapters. They were later added by the PCUS in 1942 and the ARP in 1959.<sup>76</sup> The EPC has formally included these chapters as part of our confession of faith since 1984.<sup>77</sup> The official history of the EPC has this description of the changes: “A few Presbyterians—including Warfield—expressed reservations about these new statements. Yet most embraced the additions, believing the ‘generic Calvinism of the Standards’ was still intact.”<sup>78</sup> The implication in this statement is that the majority at the time were correct, and that the Calvinism of the WCF was untouched.

The Cumberland Presbyterian Church (CPC) had separated from the PCUSA over Reformed theology during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The CPC saw the 1903 revisions, particularly the adoption of chapters 34&35, as doctrinal softening within the PCUSA towards Arminianism. One of the moderators of the CPC declared that after the adoption of chapters 34&35 that, “all that has been essential in what for a hundred years they [the CPC] had stood for now has the equally zealous support of the mother church.”<sup>79</sup> Committees from the PCUSA and CPC began working on a plan of reunion in 1904, which was completed in 1906.<sup>80</sup>

Warfield had insisted, probably in attempt to reassure himself, that the 1903 revisions to the WCF had not changed its Calvinism. But since the plan of union between the PCUSA and CPC affirmed the WCF as revised in 1903, and the CPC was decidedly not Calvinist but Arminian, Warfield asked the rhetorical question, “Why should one not a Calvinist wish to adopt a Calvinist Confession?”<sup>81</sup> The answer, of course, is that they would not, and did not. The adoption of chapters 34&35 changed the nature of the WCF’s doctrine away from historic Reformed theology. In the aftermath of the union between the PCUSA and the CPC it became clear that the 1903 alterations were towards a more generic evangelicalism that diluted the historic Reformed doctrine of the

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<sup>76</sup> The ‘Afterword on the Texts’ in the EPC’s official version of the WCF states as much, “The EPC has also adopted the new, American Chapters 34 and 35. These were added by PCUSA in 1903, and subsequently by PCUS and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.” It is strange that they are characterized as “American” chapters rather than as “PCUSA” chapters, since they have not had the universal acceptance of American Reformed churches in the way the 1788 confessional revisions do.

<sup>77</sup> *Minutes of the Fourth General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church*, 4-23, page 13. See Appendix G.IV., Motion #2 on page 178.

<sup>78</sup> Fortson III, S. Donald. *Liberty in Non-Essentials: The Story of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Celebrating 35 Years of Ministry: 1981-2016*. Livonia, MI: Evangelical Presbyterian Church, 2016, page 20.

<sup>79</sup> Longfield, Bradley J. *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013, page 139.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 140-141.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 141. Warfield also “vigorously opposed” the 1903 revisions “on grounds that the proffered changes would not improve at all but rather blur the precision already attained by the Westminster Confession of Faith.” Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 53. See footnote 22 in Appendix I for more on this particular point. That is not the description of man who “expressed reservations” as Fortson put it in *Liberty in Non-Essentials*, but of someone who believed the doctrinal integrity of his church was imperiled.

Presbyterian church.<sup>82</sup> It is disappointing that *Liberty in Non-Essentials* does not include a single reference to the CPC, much less a reference to the fact the 1903 confessional revisions allowed for an Arminian church to join the PCUSA without compromising on their doctrine. This is a highly relevant and critical aspect in evaluating the effect chapters 34&35 had on the “generic Calvinism” of our confessional standards.

The OPC rejected these chapters at their 2<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly in 1936, stating, “In recommending the elimination of the sections which are enumerated in the preceding paragraph, the Committee desires to state that it does so on the ground that these changes seriously impair the testimony of the doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. to the system of doctrine which is taught in Holy Scripture.”<sup>83</sup> The founders of the OPC had spent 30 years living in a church effected by the 1903 revisions. It was not speculation, but sound exegesis and decades of experience which led them to the conclusion that testimony of the WCF of the Bible’s doctrine had been impaired.

The EPC’s official edition of the WCF states that the ARP adopted these chapters. It fails to note that in 2014 the ARP removed these chapters from its confession on the same grounds that the OPC rejected them. While the PCUSA and ECO have these chapters, their ordination vows do not require ministers to *subscribe* to their confessions, but to be *guided* by them. This leaves the EPC in the unfortunate position of being outside the confessionally Reformed mainstream: the EPC is currently the only denomination in the world that requires its ministers to subscribe to chapters 34&35.

The ARP produced an extensive and thorough report on these chapters. I cannot do a better job than they, so the report in its entirety is included as Appendix I to this section.<sup>84</sup> The ARP is the oldest ecumenical partner for the EPC, a denomination with which the EPC has been fraternal partners since 1985.<sup>85</sup> The EPC needs to listen to the ARP well. While the OPC is a respected church from within our tradition, the ARP has been our partner for most of our existence, and has dealt with these chapters as a church that adopted, and then excised them. The reasoning of the ARP on this issue should be taken seriously: chapters 34&35 deviate from the historic theology of the Westminster Standards and inherently alter the WCF. The entire report should be read, but included here is a summary of the findings from it:

Our committee finds that our current version of the *WCF* deviates from our historic identity as an evangelical, Reformed and confessional Church that is passionate about the Gospel. Our current *WCF* with the two additional chapters, *Of the Holy Spirit* and *Of the Gospel*, are relics of 20<sup>th</sup>-century theological modernism’s movement away from historic, confessional

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<sup>82</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, “Turning Points in American Presbyterian History — Part 8: Confessional Revision in 1903,” *New Horizons*, August/September 2005.

<sup>83</sup> This is the same report previously mentioned, with involvement from Machen and Stonehouse. It can be found here: <https://www.opc.org/GA/constitution.html>.

<sup>84</sup> This report can be found in *Minutes of the General Synod of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church: Two Hundred and Tenth Stated Meeting*, pages 466-483. It can also be found online here: <https://www.theaquilareport.com/arp-synod-approves-removing-two-chapters-and-a-note-from-its-version-of-the-confession/>.

<sup>85</sup> *Liberty in Non-Essentials*, 104.



Calvinism. Both additional chapters—by emphasizing human agency in salvation—alter the original *WCF*'s design that highlights God's sovereign, eternal decree to save sinners by grace alone....

Our committee finds that Chapter 34 *Of the Holy Spirit* theologically misidentifies what we believe concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of Divine redemption. The brilliance of the *WCF* is found in its pervasive treatment of the person and work of the Holy Spirit throughout many chapters. The added chapter *Of the Holy Spirit* in its attempt to soften the Calvinism of the *WCF* provides, at best, superfluous material. Its contents appear to be ambiguous, if not subtly subversive statements to the more biblical statements on sovereignty of God designed within the whole of the *WCF*...

Our committee finds that Chapter 35 *Of the Gospel* misidentifies what we believe concerning the Gospel of God's grace. Its emphasis on a universal love of God is representative of an Amyraldian view of the decree of God and extent of the atonement that restricts the sovereignty of God. It deviates from the structure of the *WCF* that highlights the Triune God's complete work of salvation by grace alone.

Our committee believes that chapters 34 and 35...together skew our denominational identity as one that is soundly evangelical, Reformed, confessional, and passionate for Gospel-focused, Gospel-driven, Christ-centered ministry.<sup>86</sup>

The report concludes with some reflections on the purpose of confessions and the effect chapters 34&35 have had on the theological and missional identify of the ARP. What is affective about this aspect of the report is the opportunity seen: for the ARP's theological identity to be stabilized and consolidated in such a way that brings their church into greater fraternity with their Reformed partners, and provides doctrinal clarity and strength in their mission.

Confessions are intended to unify by establishing a consensus of belief. Prior to the 1959 alterations of our Standards with chapters 34 and 35 and the appended note to Chapter 3, the *WCF* more adequately demonstrated our consensus and identity *today* as an evangelical, Reformed, Gospel-focused, Gospel-driven denomination. The historical context behind the inclusion of these two chapters was one of innovation in its desire to alter the *WCF* for the purposes of ecclesiastical ecumenicity and a theological broadening. We believe that these two chapters not only disrupt the chapter-by-chapter logic of the *WCF*'s system of Reformed doctrine in expressing the sovereign plan of God to save sinners, they are dismissive of the centrality of Divine grace in salvation and powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit. Neither chapter can be viewed as helpfully contiguous with the whole of the *WCF* given the historical context behind them intent on softening and steering the standards away from the classic, evangelical, Reformed, summary of God's eternal plan of redemption.

Therefore, our committee strongly recommends that the Synod remove these early 20<sup>th</sup> century revisions—Chapters 34 *Of the Holy Spirit* and Chapter 35 *Of the Gospel*...—in order to restore our *WCF* to its original formulation. This, we believe, will better reflect our historic identity and theological commitment to biblical and Reformed theology. It will align us with NAPARC more fully. It will demonstrate to the world and the Church worldwide our unity

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 468-469.

in the faith and passionate commitment to Gospel ministry. Moreover, we believe that in order to be true to our ARP heritage that so emphasized the sovereign design of the Gospel, as one that saves sinners otherwise destined to wrath and eternal judgment, we must return to our confessional roots with such a bold denominational statement of solidarity.

Finally, we believe that in the providence of His sovereign care that our esteemed Synod has the opportunity to stabilize our denomination's theological positions firmly within the evangelical, Reformed faith, and this to be the continued evidence of the Holy Spirit's work of revival within our ranks."<sup>87</sup>

The EPC should follow the lead of the ARP. Chapters 34&35 harm the integrity of our confessional standards. We are the only church that requires ministers to subscribe to these chapters. The EPC should remove these chapters by constitutional amendment.

### Part I Conclusion

The EPC should, by constitutional amendment,

- 1) Revert the WCF and WLC to the language they possessed in the PCUSA prior to 1903;
  - i. This would delete WCF 34, 'Of the Holy Spirit';
  - ii. This would delete WCF 35, 'Of the Gospel and Love of God and Missions';
  - iii. This would revert WCF 24, 'Of Marriage and Divorce' to the original 1647 version, with the minor amendment from 1887;
  - iv. This would revert WCF 27.4, WCF 28.2, and WLC 176 on the administration of the sacraments to their original 1647 version;
  - v. All of these revisions would bring the EPC either into semantic or doctrinal alignment with the ARP, RPCNA, OPC, and PCA.
- 2) Delete the final sentence of WCF 22.2 on 'Of Lawful Oaths and Vows';
  - i. This deletion already exists in the WCF of the PCUSA, OPC, PCA, and ECO, and possibly only exists in the EPC's WCF as a clerical error.
- 3) Adopt the version of WCF 25.6 on 'Of the Church' held by the PCUSA after 1903;
  - i. This would bring the EPC into semantic or doctrinal alignment with the PCUSA, ARP, OPC, PCA, and ECO.
- 4) Delete the General Note, along with all other commentary, from the proof texts of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 482-483.

## Appendix I

### Report of the Special Committee to Review

#### *Westminster Confession of Faith*

#### Chapter 34, *Of the Holy Spirit* and Chapter 35, *Of the Gospel*

We have inherited a splendid theological tradition founded on the authority of the Bible as God’s Word. Ours is also a heritage of powerful, passionate Gospel preaching. We identify ourselves as an historically evangelical, Reformed, confessional Church passionate to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is this identity that should continue to be our goal.<sup>88</sup>

Prior to the 1782 union of the Reformed and the Associate Presbyteries to form what became the Associate Reformed Synod in Philadelphia, our Scottish forbearers had by at least 1690 adopted the *Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF)* and its appended *Larger and Shorter Catechisms* as its doctrinal standards.<sup>89</sup> Our forefathers valued the *WCF* as a carefully defined biblical summary, a document of consensus for the Reformed faith. Simple, yet possessing biblical depth, balanced in its approach to difficult areas of theology, well-defined in things plain from the Scriptures, it is a most suitable and helpful summary of things the Scriptures principally teach. Prepared as a pastoral resource to promote the Protestant faith in the English-speaking world, the original (1646) *WCF* marvelously centralizes the thematic richness of the Gospel within the framework of God’s eternal, gracious covenant. As an ecclesiastical statement it is a symbol of theological unity. Its brilliance lies in the breadth of its systematization of weighty doctrine combined with its clarity in organizing biblical data. Its articles centralize biblical doctrines that pertain to God’s salvation of sinners. Subordinate to the Word of God in all things, the *WCF* is cleverly endowed with a self-protective mechanism for reform as chapter 31.3, *Of Synods and Councils* elucidates: “All synods or councils, since the Apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.”<sup>90</sup>

Today, our Synod possesses an adapted form of the *WCF* that contains two additional chapters— 34 *Of the Holy Spirit* and 35 *Of the Gospel*, along with a note appended to chapter 3 *Of God’s Eternal Decree*.<sup>91</sup> Where additions and alterations to the *WCF* have been made by our Synod in the past, fresh questions of clarity have arisen today. Thus, the 2013 Meeting of the General Synod of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church voted, “*That the moderator appoint a committee to study the clarity*

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<sup>88</sup> 2012 Minutes of Synod, 480-90

<sup>89</sup> See Form of Government V.C.1.a.(5), X.D.1.g.(3)

<sup>90</sup> *WCF*, 31.3, “Of Synods and Councils.”

<sup>91</sup> There are of course other alterations to our version of the *WCF*, most notably made to chapter 23, *Of the Civil Magistrate*, as well as other changes in content and language.

*and the necessity of chapters 34-35 of the Westminster Confession of Faith as received by the ARP Synod and bring recommendations to the 2014 meeting of Synod and explanatory notes.”*

This is a humbling and weighty task. In this regard, our committee believes that the Synod’s passion for preaching the full Gospel “that it is the power of God unto salvation” *and* our historical commitment to the *WCF* to be indissolubly united. While subordinate to the Holy Scriptures, we believe the *WCF* to be most defining of our identity as a biblically focused, Gospel-centered, Gospel-driven, and theologically faithful Church.<sup>92</sup> Hence, our *WCF* symbolizes our denomination’s ministerial and theological commitments. In order to maintain such an identity and continue to mature as a denomination with a robust articulation of the Triune God’s application of redemption, it is necessary that our beloved *Confession of Faith* matches those things we profess.

As a committee we believe that our doctrinal standards are not mere artifacts of historic doctrine but the biblical and historic consensus of our very confession/profession of faith. We believe that our adherence to the *WCF* must never become preservationist of Presbyterian antiquity in its approach, but instead always focused at biblical clarity and faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Head of His Church. It is in this regard that we believe it to be essential for our standards to summarize accurately the powerful working of the Triune God in bringing forth His redemptive plan of the Gospel.

Within this report we have done our best to retrace our footsteps in this task of “studying the clarity and necessity of chapters 34 and 35...and explanatory notes.” It should be noted that we purposely did not account for significant biblical “proof-texting” for fear of the report becoming overly tedious. Thus, we would refer readers to the citations from the original (pre-1959) *WCF* chapters 1-33, which include the significant biblical texts as their foundation.<sup>93</sup>

**It is vital that you read the full report in order to follow the concerns of the committee!** Nevertheless, we offer this brief summary of our conclusions, as follows:

- **Our committee finds that our current version of the *WCF* deviates from our historic identity as an evangelical, Reformed and confessional Church that is passionate about the Gospel. Our current *WCF* with the two additional chapters, *Of the Holy Spirit* and *Of the Gospel*, are relics of 20<sup>th</sup>-century theological modernism’s movement away from historic, confessional Calvinism. Both additional chapters—by emphasizing human agency in salvation—alter the original *WCF*’s design that highlights God’s sovereign, eternal decree to save sinners by grace alone. Section 1 of this report outlines the history of the additional chapters and the appended notation.**
- **Our committee finds that Chapter 34 *Of the Holy Spirit* theologically misidentifies what we believe concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of Divine redemption. The brilliance of the *WCF* is found in its pervasive treatment of the person**

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<sup>92</sup> See 2011 *M.S.* 480-90

<sup>93</sup> For fuller biblical citations, we recommend the critical text prepared by S.W. Carruthers, reprinted as *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Glasgow, Free Presbyterian Publications, 1646; reprint 2003).

and work of the Holy Spirit throughout many chapters. The added chapter *Of the Holy Spirit* in its attempt to soften the Calvinism of the *WCF* provides, at best, superfluous material. Its contents appear to be ambiguous, if not subtly subversive statements to the more biblical statements on sovereignty of God designed within the whole of the *WCF*. Section 2 of this report demonstrates the need for our Synod to remove this chapter from our *WCF* for the sake of biblical and theological clarity.

- Our committee finds that Chapter 35 *Of the Gospel* misidentifies what we believe concerning the Gospel of God's grace. Its emphasis on a universal love of God is representative of an Amyraldian view of the decree of God and extent of the atonement that restricts the sovereignty of God. It deviates from the structure of the *WCF* that highlights the Triune God's complete work of salvation by grace alone. Section 3 of this report demonstrates the need for our Synod to remove this chapter from our *WCF* for the sake of biblical and theological clarity.
- Our committee believes that chapter 34 and 35 and the appended note to chapter 3 from the "Declaratory Statement" together skew our denominational identity as one that is soundly evangelical, Reformed, confessional, and passionate for Gospel-focused, Gospel-driven, Christ-centered ministry.

Therefore, with prayerful aspirations for simplicity and clarity, our committee offers the appended report in three parts with recommendations.

## I. The Historic Development of Chapters 34 and 35 in the ARP *WCF*

Since chapters 34 and 35 of our *WCF* were not a part of the original formulation of the 1646 *WCF*—the version received in the early days of our denomination in Scotland and subsequently in America—it is critical that we briefly outline their reason for being and inclusion with our current standards. Ray King, in his *A History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church*, contends that these changes do not affect the substance of the *WCF*. He writes,

*In 1799 the Associate Reformed Synod adopted the original text of the Westminster Confession with some modifications [these were regarding the power of the civil magistrate in matters of religion]. This Confession of the Associate Reformed Church remained unchanged in the Synod of the South until 1959 when the Presbyteries approved fifteen overtures involving the Confession. This did not have the effect of changing the Church's Confession. It did append an "Addendum" which interprets some points in the Confession, and it added two new chapters; one, "Of the Holy Spirit," and the other, "Of the Gospel."<sup>94</sup>*

More recently, however, William Evans has argued that the substance of the Confession is affected:

*Do these modifications change the teaching of the Confession? This is a difficult matter. As we have seen, the standard ARP interpretation is that they do not. It has also been suggested that the more universalizing tenor of the changes comports with the traditional Seceder emphasis on the free offer of the gospel. On the other hand, the original Sitz im Leben of these changes was the "broadening" PCUSA, in which a growing number were uncomfortable with*

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<sup>94</sup> Ray A. King, *A History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church* (Charlotte, N.C.: Board of Christian Education of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, 1966), 100.

*the Calvinism of Dordt and Westminster. These changes were written so that they could be read in a Calvinist or an Arminian way. In that sense, the changes dilute the distinctive teaching of the Confession.*<sup>95</sup>

Thus, the history of these changes that took place in 1959 requires further examination.

It is important that we understand **when** the two additional chapters were written. The two new chapters were not connected with the original 1646 *WCF* or the received American version of 1799. In fact, it was more than 250 years after the initial *WCF*'s drafting that any American Presbyterian body even discussed the framing of such chapters.<sup>96</sup> In *The Second Century: A History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterians, 1882-1982*, Lowry Ware and James Gettys mistakenly state that in adding the chapters, the ARPC “was following the example of the PCUS which altered the Confession of Faith by adding these two chapters in 1861.”<sup>97</sup> Doubtless, ruminations of creedal revision were being propounded by 1869.<sup>98</sup> However, the text of the added *WCF* 34 and 35 did not originate until the 20<sup>th</sup> century when they became a part of the standards of the Northern Presbyterians in 1903. Southern Presbyterians did not add the chapters until 1942.<sup>99</sup> The chapters added by the ARP Synod in 1959 were the same as those added by the Southern Presbyterians (PCUS) in 1942, which were nearly identical with those added by the Northern Presbyterians in 1903.

The historical context helps us to see **why** the ARP Synod by 1959 felt the need to augment its standards with two new chapters and the appended note to chapter 3. The process that led to the 1903 confessional revision within the Northern Presbyterian denomination was a powerful movement stemming from the confluence of cultural optimism and theological modernism. One historian noted that “Man’s dignity and confidence were rising to new heights in the late nineteenth-century world in which the Westminster Confession of Faith found itself.”<sup>100</sup> The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was remarkable for its cultural and theological changes. Proponents of revising the

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<sup>95</sup> William B. Evans, “‘Things which Become Sound Doctrine’: Associate Reformed Presbyterian Confessional and Theological Identity in the Twentieth Century, *Haddington House Journal* 8 supp. (2006): 105.

<sup>96</sup> It is probably worth noting that for the two major documents that were influential in many ways for the *WCF*, the *Thirty-nine Articles* and the *Irish Articles*, neither contains a chapter/article dedicated to “The Gospel.” Likewise, the *Irish Articles* do not contain a chapter/article on the Holy Spirit. The *Thirty-Nine Articles* do contain a separate article on the Holy Spirit (article 5), but as Letham notes, the material therein is present in *WCF* 2:3. See Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2009), 72.

<sup>97</sup> Lowry Ware and James W. Gettys, *The Second Century: A History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterians, 1882-1982* (Greenville, SC: Associate Reformed Presbyterian Center, 1982), 380. The error is likely due to a misreading of the overture that appears in the 1958 *Minutes of Synod*, p. 408, concerning the adoption of these two chapters. The 1861 Minutes of the PCUS [actually, the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States] clearly shows that these chapters were not part of its Confession of Faith. These minutes may be accessed at <https://archive.org/details/minutesofgener1861pres> (p. 7).

<sup>98</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of the Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 41.

<sup>99</sup> See the PCUSA *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996), 170.

<sup>100</sup> Loetscher, 39.

historic *WCF* were children of the “Gilded Age,” an era “which emphasized science, industry, and a movement toward a consumer-oriented society.”<sup>101</sup> As society changed and was influenced by various ideological movements, mainline denominations felt compelled to respond by adjusting their standards. Theologically, this included addressing “some of the nineteenth century’s emphases on the power and responsibility of human beings in the process of salvation...”<sup>102</sup> Church historian Philip Schaff noted that “in the last period of the nineteenth century, a demand arose within the [Northern] Church for such ecclesiastical action as would relieve objections to its statements on the salvation of infants and divine predestination.”<sup>103</sup> Strong appeals for revising the Calvinism of the *WCF* began in presbyteries by the late 1880s.<sup>104</sup> Within the mainline (Northern) denomination, an initial effort to revise their *WCF* failed to pass in the General Assembly in 1889. A leading advocate for this revision process was Charles Briggs—soon to be tried for heresy.

In the wake of that debate, another effort was launched through a General Assembly committee in 1901.<sup>105</sup> Princeton Seminary professor Geerhardus Vos was noted for his vehement opposition to the revision committee, citing its lack of serious appeal to scriptural authority for the changes it advocated.<sup>106</sup> The changes that were proposed—which included the additional chapters *Of the Holy Spirit* and *Of the Love of God and Missions* and a “Declaratory Statement”<sup>107</sup> to precede the

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<sup>101</sup> “Revisions to the Westminster Confession, 1903.” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 81, no. 3 (Sept 1, 2003), 202.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>103</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, 6th edition (Grand Rapids: Baker; 2007 reprint), 919.

<sup>104</sup> Loetscher, 42

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 920.

<sup>106</sup> Loetscher, 84

<sup>107</sup> The Declaratory Statement reads: “While the ordination vow of ministers, ruling elders, and deacons, as set forth in the Form of Government, requires the reception and adoption of the Confession of Faith only as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, nevertheless, seeing that the desire has been formally expressed for a disavowal by the Church of certain inferences drawn from statements in the Confession of Faith, and also for a declaration of certain aspects of revealed truth which appear at the present time to call for more explicit statement, therefore the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America does authoritatively declare as follows:

*First, with reference to Chapter 3 of the Confession of Faith: that concerning those who are saved in Christ, the doctrine of God’s eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine of his love to all mankind, his gift of his Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and his readiness to bestow his saving grace on all who seek it; that concerning those who perish, the doctrine of God’s eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine that God desires not the death of any sinner, but has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and freely offered in the gospel to all; that men are fully responsible for their treatment of God’s gracious offer; that his decree hinders no man from accepting that offer; and that no man is condemned except on the ground of his sin.*

*Second, with reference to Chapter 10, Section 3, of the Confession of Faith, that it is not to be regarded as teaching that any who die in infancy are lost. We believe that all dying in infancy are included in the election of grace, and are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who works when and where and how he pleases.*

entire *WCF*—endeavored to encourage a reunion with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church by softening the original *WCF*'s emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation. Both chapters appealed to those troubled by and critical of Reformed theology.

In 1903, after considerable debate, the “Declaratory Statement” and two additional chapters were used to considerably weaken the doctrine of predestination in the whole of *WCF*. J. Gresham Machen characterized the changes and additions of 1903 as “compromising amendments,” as “highly objectionable,” a “calamity,” and “a very serious lowering of the [Presbyterian and Reformed] flag.”<sup>108</sup> The evangelical and Reformed stalwart of the day, Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield “vigorously opposed” confessional revision “on grounds that the proffered changes would not improve at all but rather blur the precision already attained by the Westminster Confession of Faith.”<sup>109</sup>

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See D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, “Turning Points in American Presbyterian History — Part 8: Confessional Revision in 1903,” *New Horizons*, August/September 2005.

<sup>108</sup> *Presbyterian Guardian*, Nov. 28, 1936, pp. 69-70.

<sup>109</sup> Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 53.

Warfield's objections to revisions to the *WCF*—especially the additional chapters 34 and 35 and the “Declaratory Statement”—may be found in a number of sources. Zaspel's bibliography on page 53 proves to be exceedingly helpful: “What Is the Confession of Faith?” (address given before the Presbytery of New Brunswick, June 25, 1889), *PB* 76 (September 4, 1889); reprinted in *Shall We Revise the Confession of Faith?* (Trenton, NJ: n.p., 1889); also *On the Revision of the Confession of Faith* (New York: Randolph, 1889); “The Presbyterians and the Revision of the Westminster Confession,” *The Independent* 41 (July 18, 1889): 914-15; “Revision of the Confession of Faith I-III,” *Herald and Presbyter* 49, nos. 51-52, and so, no. 1 (1889): 2 (in all three issues); “The Presbyterian Churches and the Westminster Confession,” *PR* 10, no. 40 (1889): 646-57; “Confessional Subscription and Revision,” *PQ* 76 (November 1888); “God's Infinite Love to Men and the Westminster Confession,” *P* 59, no. 44 (1888): 6; “The Meaning of Revision of the Confession,” *PJ* 14, no. 46 (1888); “The Present Status of the Revision Controversy,” *The Central West* 4 (March 20, 1890); “As Others See Us,” *The New York Observer* 68 (August 25, 1890): 266; “True Church Unity: What It Is” (December 1890), *SSW*, 1:299-307; “The Final Report of the Committee on Revision of the Confession,” *PRR* 3 (April 1892): 322-30; “The Revision of the Westminster Confession before the Presbyteries,” *The Independent* 44 (September 22, 1892): 1316-17; “The Significance of the Westminster Standards as a Creed” (November 13, 1897), *SSW*, 2:660-62; “The Significance of Our Confessional Doctrine of the Decree” (May 17 and 24, 1900), *SSW*, 1:93-102; “Revision or Reaffirmation?”; “Is There No Danger in the Revision Movement?” *PJ* 25, no. 29 (1900): 8; “The Revision Movement in the Presbyterian Church,” *The Independent* 52 (August 1900): 1906-9; “Is It Restatement That We Need?” *PJ* 25, no. 27 (1900): 7-8; also *P* 70, no. 33 (1900): 8-10; “Revision and the Third Chapter,” *PB* 87 (August 23, 30, September 6, 1900): 12-13 (in all three issues); “Predestination in the Reformed Confessions” (January 1901), *W*, 9:117-231; “A Declaratory Statement,” in *Papers Submitted to the General Committee on Confessional Revision for Information* (n.p., 1901): 5-8; “The Making of the Westminster Confession, and Especially of Its Chapter on the Decree of God” (1901), *W*, 6:75-161; “The Confessional Situation,” *The New York Observer* 79 (May 16, 1901): 63; “The Proposed New Statement of Presbyterian Doctrine,” *P* 71, nos. 27-31 (1901): 10-11, 8-9, 8-9, 8-9, 8-9; “On the Diction of the Revision Overtures,” *P* 73, no. 12 (1903): 8-9; *PB* 89 (March 26, 1903): 1323; also *PJ* 28, no. 13 (1903): 7-8; also *Herald and Presbyter* 74, no. 12 (1903): 10-11; “Dr. Warfield's Reply,” *P* 53, no. 14 (1903): 8-9; “The Proposed Union with the Cumberland Presbyterians,” *PTR* 2, no. 2 (1904): 295-316; see also *P74*, nos. 15-19 (1904): 7-8 (in each issue); “An Humble Defense,” *CP* 67, no. 17 (1904): 519-20; “Christian Unity and Church Union: Some Primary Principles,” *PB* 91 (July 7, 1904): 103-4; “In Behalf of Evangelical Religion,” *P* 90, no. 39 (1920): 20; reprinted in *SSW*, 1:385-88.



These changes enabled the 1906 ecclesiastical union between the Arminian-leaning Cumberland Presbyterians and the mainline Northern denomination [Presbyterian Church in the USA]. It has been stated that these changes were “the decisive factor in the accomplishment of a very disastrous church union...”<sup>110</sup> The noted historian Sydney Ahlstrom concluded that the Northern Presbyterians had therefore “formally revised the Westminster Confession to an Arminian reading...”<sup>111</sup> This is highlighted by the “Declaratory Statement,” which explained that *WCF* 3, *Of God’s Eternal Decree* was to be interpreted “in harmony” with the belief that God loves all mankind and that 10.3 be interpreted to include that all dying in infancy be included in the overall election of grace.

These changes to the (then) Presbyterian Church in the USA denomination’s *WCF* were indicative of sentiments that moved away from the *WCF*’s emphasis on the sovereignty of God and confessional Calvinism, highlighting instead a universal redeeming love of God. These ideas began to spread among Southern Presbyterians within the PCUS. O. Palmer Robertson described the pervasiveness of this trend in the following manner, “the seeds of liberalism had been planted in the South as well, and came into full bloom with a movement to rewrite portions of the Westminster Confession of Faith.”<sup>112</sup>

By 1935, the southern PCUS established a committee to address the growing theological concern over the *WCF*’s dated theological construction. So remarkable was this spirit of the age that in 1938, their “committee recommended changes to eighteen paragraphs of the [*WCF*] and the addition of two new chapters, one of the Holy Spirit and one on the Gospel.”<sup>113</sup> While *some* of the changes only sought to modernize older language within the *WCF*, the softening of Calvinist doctrine became evident. Again, this softening included the new additional chapters, 34 and 35, and in so doing, modified the *WCF*’s historic and “Reformed distinctive regarding election and predestination...”<sup>114</sup> By 1942 the additional chapters *Of the Holy Spirit* and *Of the Gospel* (renamed from *Of the Love of God and Missions*) were added. Essentially, these alterations and additions were identical to those of the northern denomination of the PCUSA.<sup>115</sup> In 1958—just one year prior to the ARP Synod’s adoption of the additional chapters—the then-PCUSA merged with the United Presbyterian Church of North America, our northern sister denomination of

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<sup>110</sup> “A Step to Avoid.” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3, no. 1 (Oct 10, 1936), 1.

<sup>111</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 844.

<sup>112</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, “The Holy Spirit in the Westminster Confession of Faith,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, vol. 1, ed. Ligon Duncan (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 60.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

Scots Covenanter and Seceder heritage. Between 1937 and 1955, the PCUSA had been involved in merger negotiations with the UPCNA, PCUS of the South, and even with Episcopalians.<sup>116</sup>

Although it had taken nearly four decades longer to eschew the historic, biblical, and Reformed emphasis on the Triune God's work of salvation as outlined by the 1646 *WCF* and carefully upheld within the ARP Synod prior to 1959, the Southern PCUS also succumbed to the effects of secular modernity. The consequences of these theological amendments to the structure and theology of the *WCF*, along with the distancing from Biblical authority have become remarkable within today's Presbyterian Church (USA).<sup>117</sup>

To be sure, there was movement in the opposite direction. In the 1930s, one of our sister denominations within membership of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches (NAPARC), the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC),<sup>118</sup> conspicuously excluded the additional chapters *Of the Holy Spirit* and *Of the Gospel* in order to maintain the integrity of the *WCF*'s emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation. Theologian John Murray went so far as to call the 1903 revisions to the *WCF* "evil," maintaining:

*these revisions [and] or additions are distinctly in the path of retrogression rather than of progress, that they are decidedly symbolic of a standpoint that would undermine the very foundations of the Reformed Faith, and that therefore they should find no place in the creed of a church that professes adherence to the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession.*<sup>119</sup>

Another denomination which exited a mainline denomination because of heterodoxy, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), like the OPC, excluded the new chapters and any hint of the "Declaratory Statement" as bygone products of theological liberalism. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), never admitted to NAPARC membership, includes the additional chapters. **Thus the ARP Synod is the only NAPARC member that includes the 1903 revision chapters in its *WCF* along with the appended note to chapter 3 which is part of the 1903 "Declaratory Statement."**

While the ARP Synod maintained its confessional and biblical fidelity for another seventeen years beyond the mainline denominational debates, by "the late 1950s" the Synod's immunity to the changing of its confessional commitments came into question.<sup>120</sup> Certainly, Lowry Ware and James

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<sup>116</sup> For further explanation of the 1903 additions see D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, "Turning Points in American Presbyterian History — Part 8: Confessional Revision in 1903," *New Horizons*, August/September 2005, 97

<sup>117</sup> The Northern and Southern Presbyterians reunited in 1983 to form the mainline PC(U.S.A.).

<sup>118</sup> The OPC emerged from the Northern Presbyterian Church USA in the 1930s out of a sense of biblical, theological, and missional faithfulness that increasingly disappeared from the mainline.

<sup>119</sup> John Murray, "Shall We Include the Revision of 1903 in Our Creed?" *The Presbyterian Guardian* 2, no. 12 (Sept 26, 1936), 249.

<sup>120</sup> M.S. 1958, 391, reports the ARP Synod's involvement in November of 1957 at Princeton, N.J., in what was a "Permanent Committee on Theology of the Presbyterian Alliance." Associated with the World Alliance, its goal seems to have been a broad ecumenicity.

Gettys were correct in their analysis that “the denomination was following the example of the PCUS which altered the Confession of Faith by adding these two chapters...”<sup>121</sup> A committee, known as the “Committee on Changes in Standards,” was formed *at least* to investigate the possibility of adding the entirely new chapters *Of the Holy Spirit* and *Of Gospel*.<sup>122</sup> By 1959, the ARP Synod had adopted the two new chapters as a part of our current *WCF*, and a portion of the “Declaratory Statement” as an appended note to chapter 3 *Of God’s Eternal Decree*.<sup>123</sup> While scant information exists as to the reason behind adopting the new chapters and portion of the “Declaratory Statement,” we should rejoice that God—in His sovereignty—has not only preserved but increased our solidarity of commitment to biblical, Reformed, and confessional fidelity. Despite these additions, God has mercifully preserved us as an evangelical, Reformed, confessionally focused Church. We remain passionate to proclaim the Gospel without having succumbed to the theological perils of other Presbyterian denominations.

## II. The Theology of Chapter 34, *Of the Holy Spirit*

Given a simple reading, chapter 34, *Of the Holy Spirit* is not overtly objectionable.<sup>124</sup> It appears helpful in isolating the work of the Trinity’s third person to its own chapter, even though the *WCF* has neither a chapter “Of God the Father,” nor one “Of the Son.” Instead, the *WCF* intentionally incorporates the person and work of the Holy Spirit throughout its entire structure, while emphasizing the attributes and works of the Trinity in chapter 2, the sovereign decree of God in Chapter 3, His works *Of Creation* and *Of Providence* in chapters 4-5, and the centrality of the incarnation of God in Christ the Son as the only Mediator between God and humanity in chapter 8. Without separating the Tri-unity of God’s persons, the original design of the *WCF* was to emphasize the unity of the Godhead balanced with each of the persons’ work of bringing redemption to sinners. From this perspective, the very incorporation of the additional chapter *Of The Holy Spirit* suggests that the *WCF* in its original formulation was somehow theologically deficient. At the very least, the chapter’s inclusion fails to consider the orderly nature and pervasive instruction on the Holy Spirit of God creatively mingled within the *WCF* by the Westminster Assembly’s divines.

John Murray went so far as calling the added chapter “inadequate” and altogether “destitute” of the strength of the entire *WCF* in describing the person and work of the Spirit. Murray pointed out that “The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is adequately set forth in the Confession elsewhere, set forth indeed in a way that measures up to the high standards set by this the greatest of Reformed

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<sup>121</sup> Lowry Ware and James W. Gettys, *The Second Century, A History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterians 1882-1982* (Greenville, SC: ARP Center, 1982), 380.

<sup>122</sup> M.S. 1958, 408-420. The committee was comprised of Revs. P.A. Stroup, Chairman; G.L. Leitze, Secretary; E. Gettys; R.C. Grier; J.W. Carson; and C. B. Betts.

<sup>123</sup> The literary dependence is documented in Evans, “Things which Become Sound Doctrine,” 104-105.

<sup>124</sup> John Murray, “Shall We Include the Revision of 1903 in Our Creed? A consideration of the theological character of certain amendments to the doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.,” *The Presbyterian Guardian*, Sept. 1937, 249-251.

symbols.”<sup>125</sup> Given the historical/theological context of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Presbyterianism—liberal doctrine and the urgency surrounding denominational unions with non-Calvinist groups from which chapters 34 and 35 originated in 1903—a chapter that isolates the Holy Spirit tends to be misleading. The assumption that there is a need for an isolated chapter as such seems to call into question the veracity of the overall structure of *WCF* Calvinism. B.B. Warfield scholar Fred Zaspel helpfully elaborates:

*The doctrine of the Holy Spirit has no separate chapter in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and those who criticize the confession on this score, Warfield says, have missed the obvious: the confession is itself “a treatise on the work of the Spirit.” That is, the confession has so much to say about the Holy Spirit that it treats the subject throughout. It is no deficiency that it does not include a chapter on the Holy Spirit, Warfield contends, “Because it prefers to give nine chapters to it.” A separate chapter on the topic would simply collate teachings already stated throughout the confession and present a “meager summary” of the other nine chapters. So pervasively important did Warfield view the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.*<sup>126</sup>

Warfield’s comments perhaps explain some of the troublesome ambiguity of certain sections of chapter 34. A cursory reading of *at least* *WCF* 1-4, 7, 10-19, demonstrates the meticulous and copious attention given to the Holy Spirit within the context of revelation, the application of redemption, and the Christian life. This perhaps lends credence to the significant disdain for the *WCF*’s federal theology among those who drafted chapter 34. It more certainly leaves us with the sense of repetition of *at least* *WCF* 2.3. The first two sentences of 34.2 include material systematically placed throughout the first 33 chapters of the *WCF*, particularly the material concerning the inspiration and authority of the Word of God—which is more precisely detailed in chapter 1. This calls into question the urgency of such statements that bring similar, less definitive, or even ambiguous wording to other portions of the *WCF*.

In this light, we may note that 34.2 indicates that the Holy Spirit “prepares the way for [the gospel], accompanies it with his persuasive power, and urges its message upon the reason and conscience of men, so that they who reject its merciful offer are not only without excuse, but are also guilty of resisting the Holy Spirit.” However, such a statement seems to leave the efficacy of the gospel contingent upon a sinner’s acceptance or rejection of it. This conflicts with the *WCF*’s bolder statement of the Spirit’s work in effectual calling in 10.3 which states, that the Gospel call “is of God’s free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.” Given the historical and theological context of the additional chapters, the ambiguity of 34.2, in the very least, mitigates the biblical nature *Of God’s Eternal Decree* established in chapter 3.6. It follows,

*As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his*

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Zaspel, 327

*power, through faith, unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.*

Within the additional chapter 34 there is no obvious emphasis on Divine sovereignty in salvation. Neither is there a specific reference to the doctrine of election or predestinating grace. In fact, the opposite seems to be implicit.

Perhaps additionally problematic is 34.3. The assertion that “The Holy Spirit, Whom the Father is ever willing to give to all who ask Him, is the only efficient agent in the application of redemption” appears to highlight the graciousness of God. However, the weight of the statement rests on the contingency of the Father “ever willing” to grant the Spirit “to all who ask him.” The conditionality of human agency in the application of redemption presented in 34.3, is clearly antithetical to the overall teaching within the *WCF*. The *WCF*'s stronger, biblical statements in chapters 6.2, 4 and 9.1-3 statements on the total depravity of humanity, the doctrine of predestination in 2.2; 3.6-7, and the Trinitarian ministry of God the Father who sends His Spirit to apply salvation in 3.3; 10.1-2, rule out any human agency in the application of redemption. Thus, the teaching of Chapter 34.3 in asserting some human agency in salvation, subtly limits the sovereignty of the Spirit, which in turn, chisels away at *WCF* 3's emphasis on the sovereign decree of God.

The more theologically faithful and ordered statement of the work of the Spirit as interwoven throughout the *WCF* enhances our call to preach a gospel that is powerfully effective to save. As 10.2 states, although a sinner “is altogether passive [in salvation], until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer [the gospel] call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.” Chapter 34.2-3 fails to distinguish the working of common grace in creation *and* efficacious grace in redemption, along with differentiating the outward and effectual call of the Spirit in applying the Gospel. Hence, 7.3 stresses that the Lord gives “unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, [in order] to make them willing, and able to believe.”

Seemingly not in error, 34.4, which summarizes the working of the Spirit in the Christian life and pastoral ministry, appears to be superfluous when compared with the more biblically robust sections in 3.6, 25.3 and 26.1.

We conclude that Chapter 34 *Of The Holy Spirit* contains both ambiguous and subtly contrary statements when compared with the whole of the *WCF*. Other portions become superfluous when compared with *WCF*'s overall flow of logic that the Holy Spirit works throughout the whole program of redemption.<sup>127</sup> In light of the historical and theological developments in the creation of the 1903 added chapters, we question: was such a softening of Reformed doctrine *Of the Holy Spirit* intended to persuade the theologically Arminian-leaning Cumberland Presbyterians, or were the additions intended to appease the liberal theologians' discomfort with Calvinism? Perhaps it was a combination. We believe that such tendentiousness presented in chapter 34 **is incompatible with our denominational identity as an evangelical, Reformed, Gospel-focused, Gospel-driven**

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<sup>127</sup> See WCF 1.5-8,10; 2.3, 3.6, 4.1, 7.3, 5; 8.2,3,5,8; 10.1-4, 11.4, 12.1, 13.1-3, 14.1, 16.3,5, 17.1-3, 18.2-4, 19.7, 20.1, 21.2,3, 25.3, 26.1, 27.3, 28.2, 32.3. See also O. Palmer Robertson, “The Holy Spirit in the Westminster Confession of Faith, *Vol. 1, The Westminster Confession of Faith into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.”

**Church.** Therefore, our committee recommends that we return to our original statements (i.e. pre-1959) on the Person and work of God’s Holy Spirit and remove chapter 34.

### III. Chapter 35, *Of the Gospel*

Like the added chapter *Of the Holy Spirit*, Chapter 35, *Of the Gospel*, originally called *Of the Love of God and Missions*, was adjoined to the ARP Standards in 1959. It is true that our denomination attests to a history of powerful gospel preaching ministry.<sup>128</sup> It is, however, important to understand that the “free offer of the Gospel,” as it was defined by the formation of Associate Presbytery in Scotland in the 1730s, is the root of such emphasis.<sup>129</sup>

Our forefathers affirmed the free offer of the Gospel in the wake of the controversy surrounding the theological emphases contained in the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645). This book carefully articulated a biblically balanced approach to the graciousness of the Gospel by avoiding the pitfalls of legalism and antinomianism, prevalent extremes in the age of the Puritans. In fact, the “free offer of the Gospel” for our forefathers was understood as precluding any conditionality of human agency in the offer of the Gospel. Thus, chapter 35 *Of the Gospel* has **no historic link with the Marrow controversy**, or how our forefathers, the so-called “Marrowmen,” theologically understood “the free offer of the Gospel.” Indeed, given our heritage that stems from the strong preaching of the “Marrowmen,” who emphasized the *WCF* doctrines of grace and covenant theology<sup>130</sup>, chapter 35 appears to limit the irresistible, powerful call of God within the Gospel itself.

To be sure, Chapter 35 was drafted in a broad enough way that it *could be interpreted* as harmonious with the rest of the *WCF* if by merely stressing the importance of the Gospel for *all humanity*. Striking, however, is the omission of God’s love as manifested in His election of sinners unto salvation. Chapter 35.1-2 present a precarious confusion between God’s “infinite and perfect love” in salvation, as “provided in the covenant of grace, through the mediation and sacrifice of Christ” and the common benevolence of God (that is non-saving) toward His highest creation, “the whole lost race of man.” This ambiguity tends toward a universalizing of the love of God and the elevation of human agency over salvation. Together, these tendencies limit the greatness of Divine grace in the application of redemption which the originally constructed *WCF* accentuates.

There are other difficulties. A closer reading of Chapter 35 shows it to betray the theological system of the original *WCF*’s statement that the eternal love of God centers on Jesus Christ, who accomplishes the Gospel through the covenant of grace by being the only Mediator between God and the elect as emphasized in *WCF* 3; 7; 8.1; 10. The logic of the *WCF* carefully places the emphasis of the love of God in manifesting the Gospel *through* Christ within the eternal decree of God (*WCF* 3), but by means of the covenant of grace (*WCF* 7). While 35.1 appears to affirm a free offer of the gospel out of the “perfect love” of God, 35.1-3 *undermines* the assertion of 7.3 “that the Lord was pleased...promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy

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<sup>128</sup> 2011 *MS*, 489.

<sup>129</sup> *The Acts of the Associate Presbytery Concerning The Doctrine of Grace* (Edinburgh: T.W. Ruddimans, 1744).

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.” 35.1-3 moves away from the assertion of 8.5 that declares the certainty (particularity) of God’s redemption of sinners through the

*Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience, and sacrifice of himself, which he, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him.*

Similar to the additional chapter *Of the Holy Spirit*, Chapter 35’s failure to mention the work of the Spirit of God to effectually call sinners (to faith) who are spiritually unable to believe on their own initiative (6.4; 10.1-2), *deviates* from the biblical view that the “Gospel is the power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1.16). A stronger, more biblical attestation to the Gospel is to be found in *WCF* 8.8:

*To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption, he doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same; making intercession for them, and revealing unto them, in and by the Word, the mysteries of salvation; effectually persuading them by his Spirit to believe and obey, and governing their hearts by his Word and Spirit...*

Hence, 35.1-3 places the priority of salvation on the sinner and not on the Author of salvation Himself, the Triune God.

Chapter 35 skews the biblical and Reformed view that it is in the Gospel that God’s love, combined with His care for His creation and His grace toward sinners, is brought to its highest expression. Divine love is more clearly spelled out, in that the Triune God would preserve His glory in his justice and love through the Gospel established by Christ and applied by His Holy Spirit. The love of God is clearly demonstrated by not leaving all humanity hardened toward Him, rebellious, and with wills in bondage to sin. In sovereign mercy, God has chosen some unto salvation. He graciously calls them by His Holy Spirit through the preaching of His Word, to faith in Christ. Yet, He fully secures the salvation of the elect through Christ’s active and passive obedience. The better description of the love of God is seen in the *WCF*’s full treatment of the Gospel’s work to justify sinners to Holy God through Christ, in a gracious Father Who adopts His elect and supplies His Spirit to sustain them by grace, Who sanctifies them by His Word and Spirit, Who empowers them to good works, and Who preserves them in His grace. This is the logic of the Gospel in its fullness more precisely outlined in *WCF* 3 *Of the Decree of God* and carefully elaborated in the logic of each of the *WCF*’s chapters 5-17.

Chapter 35.2 awkwardly indicates that God “by His Spirit accompanying the word pleads with men to accept His gracious invitation.” This obscures the biblical data and clearer teaching of the *WCF* that God’s Spirit does not plead with all men equally in the gospel. *WCF* 10.1 summarizes the scriptures well, concluding

*All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by his almighty power,*

*determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.*

Moreover, the suggestion in 35.2 that “God promises eternal life to all” on condition of true repentance and belief in Christ, contradicts the graciousness of God’s efficacious call to a hardened, rebellious sinner. The call of the Gospel through the Holy Spirit itself demonstrates, according to *WCF* 10.2, that it is by “God’s free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.” While 35.2 does not explicitly deny the emphasis of 10.2, it spirals it into ambiguity. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to plead with *some* but not necessarily all men to embrace the Gospel according to *WCF* 10.4. Yet, 35.2 ostensibly indicates that God does all He can to save humanity through the Gospel—even pleading with them “to accept his gracious invitation.”

Similar confusion exists in 35.3. Standing alone, 35.3 appears acceptable enough, saying that those who, upon hearing the gospel, “continue in impenitence and unbelief incur aggravated guilt and perish by their own fault.” However, given the previous two sections, which highlight a sinner’s embrace of the Gospel, it seems as if saving faith or unbelief rest in human free will. Again this appears to invalidate *WCF* 3.7, which asserts that the salvation of sinners resides in the will of God.

Chapter 35.4 appears superfluous with regard to 1.1, 5-8; 3.8; 7.1; 10.3; 11.2; 14-15.1; 21.6; 22. Furthermore, given the ambiguity of 35.1-3 and its softening of the *WCF*’s Calvinism with its marked emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation, it appears fruitless.

Theologically, we believe Chapter 35—in accentuating a universal love of God—to be representative of at least an Amyraldian view of the decree of God and extent of the atonement that restricts the sovereignty of God in salvation to a considerable degree. It is also possible to interpret the chapter as Arminian in its tone (re-ordering the decree of God over salvation, and, of course, denying the total depravity of human nature). It seems clear that chapter 35 creates substantial difficulties in maintaining the *WCF*’s overall structure. It is our opinion that the structural deviation from God’s eternal decree, in turn, weakens our identity as a denomination that maintains the Gospel’s power to save; that God saves unbelievers by grace alone, even through the foolishness of our preaching (Ephesians 2.8-9; 1 Corinthians 1.18-31). Instead of inhibiting evangelism (or missions), the emphases of the Reformed faith explicit in the *WCF* chapters 1-33 lead directly to active Gospel-focused and Gospel-driven ministry. The doctrine of election compels us to preach in the same way it did for the Apostle Paul, “who endured all things for the sake of the elect” (2 Timothy 2.10), or Peter who insisted with the “elect” in Asia that according to God’s “great mercy...He has caused us to be born again...through...Jesus Christ...to an inheritance that is imperishable” (1Peter 1.3-4).

#### **IV. Concluding Recommendations to the 2014 Meeting of the General Synod of the ARPC**

Confessions are intended to unify by establishing a consensus of belief. Prior to the 1959 alterations of our Standards with chapters 34 and 35 and the appended note to chapter 3, the *WCF* more adequately demonstrated our consensus and identity *today* as an evangelical, Reformed, Gospel-



focused, Gospel-driven denomination. The historical context behind the inclusion of these two chapters was one of innovation in its desire to alter the *WCF* for the purposes of ecclesiastical ecumenicity and a theological broadening. We believe that these two chapters not only disrupt the chapter-by-chapter logic of the *WCF*'s system of Reformed doctrine in expressing the sovereign plan of God to save sinners, they are dismissive of the centrality of Divine grace in salvation and powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit. Neither chapter can be viewed as helpfully contiguous with the whole of the *WCF* given the historical context behind them intent on softening and steering the standards away from the classic, evangelical, Reformed, summary of God's eternal plan of redemption.

Therefore, our committee strongly recommends that the Synod remove these early 20<sup>th</sup>-century revisions—Chapters 34, *Of the Holy Spirit* and Chapter 35, *Of the Gospel*, along with the appended note “(b)” to Chapter 3, *Of God's Eternal Decree*—in order to restore our *WCF* to its original formulation. This, we believe, will better reflect our historic identity and theological commitment to biblical and Reformed theology. It will align us with NAPARC more fully. It will demonstrate to the world and the Church worldwide our unity in the faith and passionate commitment to Gospel ministry. Moreover, we believe that in order to be true to our ARP heritage that so emphasized the sovereign design of the Gospel, as one that saves sinners otherwise destined to wrath and eternal judgment, we must return to our confessional roots with such a bold denominational statement of solidarity.

Finally, we believe that in the providence of His sovereign care that our esteemed Synod has the opportunity to stabilize our denomination's theological positions firmly within the evangelical, Reformed faith, and this to be the continued evidence of the Holy Spirit's work of revival within our ranks. It is in this spirit, that our committee therefore presents the following recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

1. That Chapter 34, *Of the Holy Spirit* in our current version of the *WCF*, be removed in favor of the clearer biblical and theological pervasive inclusion of the Holy Spirit throughout the first 33 chapters of the *WCF*.
2. That Chapter 35, *Of the Gospel*, given its specious biblical and theological grounds and its ambiguity of the sovereignty of God in salvation and the power of the Gospel therein, be excluded from the *WCF*.
3. That the appended Note “(b)”, while pertaining to chapter 3, but intended to highlight the additional chapters 34 and 35, be removed from the *WCF*.
4. That the Synod, in a spirit of revival and in solidarity of fellowship, express its thanksgiving to God in prayer for His sovereign care over the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.