

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.¹

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.² 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.”³

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*.⁴ 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 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.*”

¹ 2012 Minutes of Synod, 480-90

² See Form of Government V.C.1.a.(5), X.D.1.g.(3)

³ *WCF*, 31.3, “Of Synods and Councils.”

⁴ 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.

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.⁵ 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.⁶

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 20th-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 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**

⁵ See 2011 *M.S.* 480-90

⁶ 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).

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.”*⁷

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

⁷ 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.*⁸

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.⁹ 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."¹⁰ Doubtless, ruminations of creedal revision were being propounded by 1869.¹¹ However, the text of the added *WCF* 34 and 35 did not originate until the 20th century when they became a part of the standards of the Northern Presbyterians in 1903. Southern Presbyterians did not add the chapters until 1942.¹² 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."¹³ The turn of the 20th century was remarkable for its cultural and theological changes. Proponents of revising the

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ 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.

¹² See the PCUSA *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996), 170.

¹³ Loetscher, 39.

historic *WCF* were children of the “Gilded Age,” an era “which emphasized science, industry, and a movement toward a consumer-oriented society.”¹⁴ 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...”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ Strong appeals for revising the Calvinism of the *WCF* began in presbyteries by the late 1880s.¹⁷ 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 1901.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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”²⁰ to precede the

¹⁴ “Revisions to the Westminster Confession, 1903.” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 81, no. 3 (Sept 1, 2003), 202.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, 6th edition (Grand Rapids: Baker; 2007 reprint), 919.

¹⁷ Loetscher, 42

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 920.

¹⁹ Loetscher, 84

²⁰ 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.”²¹ 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.”²²

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.

²¹ *Presbyterian Guardian*, Nov. 28, 1936, pp. 69-70.

²² 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...”²³ The noted historian Sydney Ahlstrom concluded that the Northern Presbyterians had therefore “formally revised the Westminster Confession to an Arminian reading...”²⁴ 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.”²⁵

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.”²⁶ 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...”²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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

²³ “A Step to Avoid.” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3, no. 1 (Oct 10, 1936), 1.

²⁴ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 844.

²⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, “The Holy Spirit in the Westminster Confession of Faith,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, vol. 1, ed. Ligon Duncan (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *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.²⁹

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).³⁰

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),³¹ 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.*³²

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.³³ Certainly, Lowry Ware and James

²⁹ 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

³⁰ The Northern and Southern Presbyterians reunited in 1983 to form the mainline PC(U.S.A.).

³¹ 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.

³² John Murray, "Shall We Include the Revision of 1903 in Our Creed?" *The Presbyterian Guardian* 2, no. 12 (Sept 26, 1936), 249.

³³ 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...”³⁴ 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*.³⁵ 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*.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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

³⁴ Lowry Ware and James W. Gettys, *The Second Century, A History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterians 1882-1982* (Greenville, SC: ARP Center, 1982), 380.

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ The literary dependence is documented in Evans, “Things which Become Sound Doctrine,” 104-105.

³⁷ 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.”³⁸ Given the historical/theological context of early 20th-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.*³⁹

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

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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**

⁴⁰ 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 21st 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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 theology⁴³, 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

⁴¹ 2011 *MS*, 489.

⁴² *The Acts of the Associate Presbytery Concerning The Doctrine of Grace* (Edinburgh: T.W. Ruddimans, 1744).

⁴³ *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 20th-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.

Respectfully submitted,

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