

CONFESSING THE FAITH TODAY: THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF SUBORDINATE STANDARDS

A Study Document for The Presbyterian Church in Canada

There is a long history of confessing the faith in the Christian church, from the earliest period of the church to the present time. In recent years, a number of questions have arisen in General Assemblies of The Presbyterian Church in Canada that pertain to the nature and status of the confessions of the church. Further questions have arisen about their role as subordinate standards, that is, confessional standards subordinate to scripture in the life of the church.

The 124th General Assembly in 1998 adopted Living Faith/Foi Vivante as a subordinate standard (A&P 1998, p. [471](#), [42](#)). The Assembly thus added these contemporary statements of faith to the existing subordinate standards of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647, adopted 1875 and 1889) and the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation (adopted 1955). Following the adoption, the General Assembly instructed the Church Doctrine Committee to “prepare a study for sessions and presbyteries on the nature and function of a subordinate standard in the life of the courts and congregations of the church, and on the documents Living Faith and Foi Vivante, in light of the nature and function of subordinate standards within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.” (A&P 1998, p. [42](#))

Besides the action of adopting additional subordinate standards, other matters before the church recently have raised similar questions about the nature of confession. The several overtures in the past few years concerning the language used with reference to the Pope in the Westminster Confession of Faith relate to the issues about the role and function of subordinate standards. These overtures also raise issues about current understandings of and adherence to a document that originated over 350 years ago.

This document, “Confessing the Faith Today”, is the result of the work of the Church Doctrine Committee in response to the General Assembly’s instruction. In carrying out the task of preparing this study document, the committee struck a sub-committee that began to consider the issues. We requested and received permission from the 127th General Assembly (A&P 2001, p. [255](#), [41](#)) to circularize the churches and presbyteries with a series of questions about the understanding, purpose and use of the subordinate standards in the church today. We studied the history of confessionalism within the church and particularly within The Presbyterian Church in Canada. We have attempted to write a thorough and accessible study document that can help the church understand the idea of confessing the faith and the role and functions of subordinate standards in the courts and congregations of the church today.

The document contains several parts.

- The first part, “The Nature of Presbyterian Confessionalism”, is an overview of the nature of confession and its place within the historic Church since the days of the apostles. In particular, this section highlights the characteristics of confessions within the Reformed tradition within which The Presbyterian Church in Canada stands.
- The second part, “Approaches to Confessions as Subordinate Standards in The Presbyterian Church in Canada Since 1875”, focuses on the interpretation of the Westminster Confession of Faith as a subordinate standard in the history of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. This section further is concerned to explain the various understandings of what it means to “subscribe” to a confession as a subordinate standard, and thus to explain how the church relates to and uses subordinate standards in its life.
- The third part, “Replies to the Survey on Subordinate Standards”, reports on the range of responses the committee received to its survey. This part reports on how individuals and congregations currently understand and use the confessions and subordinate standards.
- The fourth section, “Conclusions”, draws on the three previous sections to propose an understanding of the confessions as statements of faith within the church and as subordinate standards to which church leaders subscribe in taking their vows of office.
- The final section, “Confessions in the Presbyterian Heritage”, provides a helpful historical summary and overview of the principal confessions in use in the church today.

PART 1: THE NATURE OF PRESBYTERIAN CONFSSIONALISM

A Confessional Church

The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a confessional church. It is so in a twofold sense: first, in a general sense in that like other Christian churches it receives persons into its membership upon confession or profession of their faith. This confession may be expressed in the words of the Apostles' Creed or in an affirmative response to a question such as: "Do you believe in God as your heavenly Father, in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour and in the Holy Spirit as your guide and comforter?" Secondly, it is confessional in the particular sense that it requires its ministers, elders and deacons to adhere to its confessional standards. These include the ecumenical creeds and Reformation confessions and specifically, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation and Living Faith/Foi Vivante as its "subordinate standards". They are so described because they are subordinate to the primary standard, Holy Scripture.

Indeed, Canadian Presbyterian Church officers make a threefold commitment: first, to Jesus Christ, the only King and Head of the church; secondly, to scripture as the canon of all doctrine by which Christ rules faith and life; and thirdly, to the creeds, confessions and subordinate standards. By its first commitment, the church professes to be evangelical; by its second, to be biblical; and by its third, to be confessional.

Faith is the Mother of Confession

Confession follows upon faith, which is always prior to it. Faith is the gift of God and it comes as a result of hearing, and hearing comes through the preaching of Christ (Romans 10: 9-17). Yet faith is never silent. It expresses itself before God and before fellow human beings in joyful confession. *Credo, ergo confiteor* (I believe, therefore, I confess). The connection between faith and confession has been set out clearly in John Calvin's comment on Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:13: "Scripture says, 'I believed and therefore I spoke out', and we too, in the same spirit of faith, believe and therefore speak out." In his customary brief and lucid manner, Calvin states: "... faith is the mother of confession."¹ Further, confession is both an individual and a community act. The individual says "I believe", and as a member of a community affirms, "we believe".

The church confesses its faith not only by its creeds and confessions but also by its life and work, its service and suffering. It would be wrong to understand confession as a matter of the mind only and not also of the whole person. Geoffrey Wainwright and others have drawn our attention to the significance of hymns in expressing and confessing the Christian faith. A hymn is a sung praise of God and its memorability (e.g. "Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so") has a way of penetrating thought and life. Adolf von Harnack has suggested that hymns have played an important part from the beginning in the witness, mission and expansion of Christianity.² Significantly, Charles Wesley called his 1780 hymnbook "a little body of experimental and practical divinity."³ Christian art, church architecture, church music (apart from hymns) are other ways in which the church confesses its faith before others.

Often the most persuasive confession is that of a holy Christian life. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father in heaven" (Matthew 7: 21). That is, confession is nonverbal as well as being verbal. To use a simple example, regular church attendance, a nonverbal act, can, in our day of low church attendance, be a witness to our neighbours of our Christian commitment and loyalty. In his discussion of the ministry of the church, Karl Barth lists, in addition to the ministries of speech (praise, preaching, teaching, evangelism, mission and theology), six ministries of action. These include prayer, the cure of souls, personal examples of Christian life and action, diaconal or material service, prophetic action and the establishing of fellowship.⁴ Of the ministry of personal example, Barth writes, "... the community always needs and may point to the existence of specific individuals, who ... stand out as models or examples in their special calling and endowment ..."⁵ The production and existence of saintly lives is very much a Protestant and Reformed concern.

Biblical Confessions

When ancient Israel recounted the story of faith, they preserved in narrative and poem their confessions about God's acts of salvation and God's nature. This confessional story of God's

grace for God's people begins with Abraham. "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred ... to the land that I will show you'" (Genesis 12:1-9) Perhaps the earliest poem about salvation is the people's response to their redemption from Egypt through God's miracle at the sea, "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Exodus 15:1-18). The writers of the Old Testament also recorded moments when more self-conscious confessional statements were made. For example, the individual Israelite and the community of Israel confessed in a historical creed: "... A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt ... And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us ... and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm ..." (Deuteronomy 26: 5-9; see also Joshua 24). Later in Israel's life, the Psalms were used in worship to express the faith of the people (see especially Psalms 105-106).

Ancient Israel also used and recorded statements about their belief in God and God's nature. Perhaps the best known of these confessional statements is Deuteronomy 6:4-6. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Statements about God's sovereignty and creative power are also found in the Psalms and prophets. "For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed" (Psalm 95:3-5; see also Amos 5:8). Some statements express God's loving nature. The most common statement, found over 150 times in the witness of ancient Israel, is the bold and eloquent statement of trust in God: "God's steadfast love endures forever" (see Psalm 136).

The event of Christ's coming, death and resurrection marked the critical juncture that gave birth to Christian confession. Throughout the New Testament we have Christological confessions beginning with what is probably the first and shortest formula, "Jesus is Lord" (Philippians 2:11; 1 Corinthians 12:3, etc.). Generally, the titles used of Jesus by the gospel writers also witness to early and basic confessions about Jesus identity and work. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," confessed Peter on behalf of the disciples in response to Jesus' question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16: 13-16; cf. also Mark 8: 29). An early Christological confession probably stands behind the hymn-like language of Colossian 1:15-20: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation ... He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead" Also cited are binitarian confessions, such as, "... yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Corinthians 8:6; cf. also Romans 4:24, 1 Timothy 6:13ff, etc.). There is, as well, as the explicitly trinitarian affirmation: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28: 19; cf also 2 Corinthians 13:14).

During the first few centuries of the Christian era, the trinitarian formula was largely employed at the rite of baptism. It became the accepted formula not only because of its use in baptism but also because of the need for the church to articulate the implicit trinitarian faith of the New Testament documents in response to challenges regarding the eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ.⁶ A number of circumstances in the life of the Christian community contributed to creed-like formulas. These included preaching (Acts 2-3); teaching (1 Corinthians 15:3-7); worship (Philippians 2:6-11); baptism (Acts 8:36-38); exorcism (Acts 3:6; Mark 1:24); confession (1 Timothy 6:12-16) martyrdom (Acts 7:54-56); and controversy (1 John 4:2; cf. also 1 Corinthians 12:3).⁷

The Making of Creeds

In a move to achieve doctrinal consensus in the early church, creeds were gradually formulated. Our English word, "creed" comes from the Latin word *credo*, which means, "I believe", with which the Apostles' Creed begins. A creed is thus a brief statement of and summary of the main points of the Christian faith which are held in common by Christians. Two such principal creeds gained authority in the first few centuries. The first is the Apostles' Creed,⁸ which confessed faith in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (and church, forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body and eternal life) in the simple and direct language of the New Testament. The second is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (more commonly known as the Nicene Creed). This is a longer version that expanded on the Christological and central article of the Apostles' Creed affirming Jesus Christ's oneness with God: "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father."⁹ It also elaborated on the article of

faith in the Holy Spirit as “the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son,¹⁰ who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified.” The contemporary use of these creeds in the worship services of many Christian denominations is a living witness to our continuity with the early church and the apostolic faith.

Creeds and Confessions

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century proved to be a major turning point and it had the effect of ushering in a number of new confessions. Although the distinction should not be pressed too far, confessions differ from creeds in that they are usually lengthy and pertain to a particular denomination, emphasizing the specific beliefs of that denomination while creeds pertain to the whole church. Confessions do not attempt to replace the ancient creeds but to explain and elaborate them in the light of biblical teaching and in the face of specific issues, such as the doctrines of grace, faith, justification, church ministry and sacraments, church and state, as well as issues particularly related to historical context.

Other Denominations and Confessionalism

It is helpful to compare and contrast the way that Canadian Presbyterianism is confessional in relation to other Canadian churches. The Anglican ordinand is required to believe in the Bible as the Word of God and to conform to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Anglican Church of Canada.¹¹ This doctrine is not actually specified in the ordination vows. Still, the Anglican communion has probably been the most “creedal” of all churches in its public worship. The Apostles’ Creed is a part of Sunday worship and the Nicene Creed is said either on Sunday at eucharist or at major Christian festivals. Yet, it has been noted that there is now a sizeable body of Anglican opinion that is ill at ease with the continuing use of the traditional creeds in public worship.¹²

Canadian Convention Baptists adhere to the Bible as the Word of God. They have adopted most of our church’s Living Faith/Foi Vivante except for the sections on Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and Ministry. Yet each congregation, in accordance with the congregational polity of the Baptist Convention has its own confession to which the Baptist minister must adhere.

Lutherans are one of the most explicitly confessional of all denominations. Ministers are required to subscribe to the *Book of Concord*, which includes the Augsburg Confession. This latter confession is not only regarded as authoritative but as unchangeable and irreplaceable.¹³ Apart from the *Formula of Concord*, the Lutheran confessions were written from 1529 to 1537 on German soil by Philip Melancthon and Martin Luther. They reflect Luther’s emphasis on justification by faith alone, the experience of salvation, the correction of various church abuses, and Luther’s distinctive teaching of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. The *Book of Concord* opens with the Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian creeds affirming that Lutheranism is a continuation of the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. It includes the Augsburg Confession (1530), Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531), the Smalcald Articles (1537), Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537), the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther (1529) and the Formula of Concord (1577).

Roman Catholicism has historically spoken of two sources of revelation, scripture and tradition. Although it regards scripture as primary, the Roman symbols which include the ecumenical creeds and the statements of councils such as Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II are regarded as co-ordinate to and not subordinate to scripture. The position of Greek Orthodoxy is similar in understanding these two sources of revelation.¹⁴

The United Church of Canada has a Basis of Union that is a brief statement of faith¹⁵ and it has formulated A New Creed (1968) which it includes in its new hymnbook, *Voices United*, along with the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. United Church ministers, in accordance with the congregational polity of the Congregational Church that entered Church Union in 1925, are not required to subscribe to the ecumenical creeds or to any particular confession of faith.

Reformed Confessionalism

The term “Reformed” refers to those churches of the Reformation which trace their origins to the work of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich and John Calvin in Geneva. These churches were exceedingly prolific in the production of confessions over a considerable period of time and over a large geographical area where they spread. More than sixty confessions were formulated during the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, plus many catechisms, which are basically statements of faith using a question and answer form. This large number and great variety of Reformed confessions is not, as John Leith has pointed out, simply, the accident of history and geography but is rooted in Reformed theology.¹⁶ Zwingli, Calvin, Knox and other Reformed theologians were vigorously opposed to all idolatry, and that meant for them the idolatry of a singular confession.

The large number of Reformed confessions testifies to the Reformed understanding that no one confession can claim or presume to be the one true confession. Having a number of confessions guarded against creedal idolatry. Reformed confessions “will always be many and not one.”¹⁷ Thus Heinrich Bullinger and Leo Jud signed the First Helvetic Confession with these words: “We wish in no way to prescribe for all churches through these articles a single rule of faith. For we acknowledge no other rule of faith than Holy Scripture We grant to everyone the freedom to use his own expressions which are suitable for his church.”¹⁸ Among the major and minor Reformed confessions are the following: Zwingli’s Sixty-Seven Articles of Religion (1523), the Ten Conclusions of Berne (1528), Confession of Basel (1534), First Helvetic Confession (1536), Calvin’s Catechisms (1537, 1541), Scots Confession (1560), Belgic Confession (1561), Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Second Helvetic Confession (1566), Canons of Dort (1619), Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms (1647-48), Barmen Declaration (1934), Confession of 1967, Living Faith/Foi Vivante (1983), A Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (1983) and the Kairos document (1986).

Characteristics of Reformed Confessionalism

1. The primary standard is Holy Scripture. According to the Reformed understanding, the authority of creeds and confessions is not absolute but relative; i.e. subordinate to the authority of scripture. No confession can replace scripture. At the same time, no confession can be regarded as being on a comparable level with the scripture. It belongs to the character of Reformed confessions that they point beyond themselves. The centre of gravity lies outside and not within the confession itself. While faith is the mother of confession, faith does not confess itself but testifies to what is written and what is written witnesses to God’s revelation. Thus the Second Helvetic Confession states that the canonical scriptures are the Word of God. “And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing be either added to or taken from the same.”¹⁹ The specific content of Reformed confessions has its source in scripture and is authoritative to the extent that it sets out as accurately as possible the biblical witness.
2. The centre of the biblical witness is Jesus Christ, or to employ John Calvin’s phrase, “Christ clothed with his gospel.” Reformed confessions seek to bear witness to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ witnessed to by the Holy Spirit in Holy Scripture. To say this is to say that Reformed confessions are trinitarian. While only two verses in the entire Bible, Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:13 are trinitarian in character, the pattern of divine action; namely, that the Father is revealed in the Son through the Holy Spirit, is frequently witnessed to by the New Testament writers.²⁰ This combined witness led the church, during the trinitarian controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, to formulate the main elements of the doctrine of the Trinity.²¹ This teaching affirms that the one and only God is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit, equal in power and glory. Reformed theology not only appropriated the doctrine of the Trinity but also made it central in its confessions and catechisms.²²

The trinitarianism of the Reformed confessions is ensured by the strong emphasis on Christ’s divinity. Jesus Christ stands at the very centre of the church’s confession of faith. This is evident in both the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds. Not only is the second article of both creeds the longest but it also gives content to and strengthens the other two articles or parts of the creeds. Indeed, it may be said that the doctrines taught by the two creeds are related to Jesus Christ as radii to the centre of a circle: the doctrines of God, the Holy Spirit, the church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and eternal life. The Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Churches in Nazi Germany (1934) is a ringing affirmation of the sole Lordship of Jesus Christ. “Jesus Christ, as he is testified to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and

obey in life and in death.”²³ Similarly, our Preamble to the Ordination Questions states: “The Presbyterian Church in Canada is bound only to Jesus Christ the Church’s King and Head.”

3. Confessions have a provisional and not a final character. Brian Gerrish has compared Reformed confessions to the Encyclopaedia Britannica that issues revisions every few years. The analogy is a helpful one. Unlike Lutheran confessions and particularly, the Augsburg which is regarded as unchangeable and irreplaceable, Reformed confessions were viewed as capable of being changed or replaced.²⁴ The First Helvetic Confession (1536) was replaced by the Second Helvetic Confession thirty years later. The Belgic Confession was constantly revised from 1561 to 1619. The Scots Confession (1560) was replaced by the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1647 by General Assembly and in 1649 and again in 1690 by the Scottish Parliament. In turn, the Westminster Confession of Faith has been revised by adding chapters as has been done by American Presbyterianism or by making Declaratory Acts as has been the case by Scottish Presbyterianism, a practice which has been emulated by Canadian Presbyterianism. The advantage of employing Declaratory Acts is that they recognise the historical integrity of the Westminster documents and do not seek to change their wording but to update, as it were, after the fashion of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. In more recent times, American Presbyterianism has not continued its practice of altering the content and wording of the Westminster Confession of Faith, but has instead followed the method of producing a Book of Confessions, beginning with the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds and concluding with the Confession of 1967 and A Brief Statement. This is definitely a preferable practice because it views creeds and confessions as important signposts over a stretch of two millennia, directing the church in its worship and witness, its mission and service. The task of revising confessions is pursued by producing new confessions that are seen as “tracts for the times” rather than by changing this or that word, phrase or paragraph in an ancient or more recent document.

Reformed confessions do not claim finality or perfection for themselves. Indeed, they admit their capacity for error. The Scots Confession (1560) makes this clear in its preface by inviting the reader who finds anything in the confession contrary to God’s Word to inform the formulators who will reform what they prove to be amiss.²⁵ The Westminster Confession of Faith asserts in its Chapter 31, Of Synods and Councils: “All synods or councils since the Apostles’ time, 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 an help in both.”²⁶ From the beginning, Reformed and Presbyterian churches have always regarded their confessions as open to revision and improvement and even as liable to be superseded as noted above.

4. Confessionalism is a continuing and never a completed task of Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Confessions are not static monuments but guideposts for the Christian community in its journey as a pilgrim church through history. This means that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has a continuing task to confess its faith. The second paragraph of the Preamble to the Ordination Questions makes this clear when after speaking of the subordinate standards, it adds: “and such doctrine as the church in obedience to Scripture and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, may yet confess in the church’s continuing task of reformulating the faith.” This open-ended assertion, to be sure, assumes that all such reformulation is subject to the Barrier Act procedure that requires the approval of all new doctrinal formulations by the presbyteries and by two General Assemblies of the church.

Canadian Presbyterians have always recognized themselves as an *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, that is, as “a reformed church, always reforming”. This is specifically reflected in the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation, section [11](#) on “Reformation by the Word of God”. Reformation is a never-ending task. It is not change for the sake of change. Rather, it is reformation and renewal in obedience to God’s Word under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, or, as the other phrase of the formula, often omitted, puts it, *secundum verbum Dei*, that is, “according to the Word of God”.

The creeds and confessions of the church serve as directives for its worship, preaching, teaching, mission and service in the world. These creeds, confessions and declarations merit the knowledge, consent, acceptance and respect of the church's ministers, elders, deacons and people. When they are dismissed with a shrug of indifference or neglected, the church's confessional character is put in question. But when the creeds and confessions are known and used by the church, they help us to understand and express our faith and through that, to live our faith in all aspects of the life and ministry of the church.

PART 2: APPROACHES TO CONFESSIONS AS SUBORDINATE STANDARDS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA SINCE 1875

The Reformed tradition has been described as an "open-ended" rather than a "fixed" confessional tradition. In an open-ended tradition, a confession sets out a statement of beliefs as adequate and appropriate for a particular context and occasion in the church's life with the expectation that such a statement also contributes to the ongoing life and witness of the church in the future. Such statements take their place as part of a confessional line-up, preceded by statements from the past, and contributing to statements in the future - what one scholar has called, "a wide river with many currents."²⁷ In contrast with an "open" or "open-ended" confessional tradition, a "fixed" or "closed tradition" identifies one or more confessional statements as definitive with the expectation that such statements will provide the doctrinal substance of the life and witness of the church as they become the basis of ongoing interpretation.

The history of the interpretation of the Westminster Confession of Faith in The Presbyterian Church in Canada since 1875 indicates that Canadian Presbyterians have moved between an open-ended and a fixed confessional tradition. Yet, several indications point to a church that has increasingly understood itself as standing within an ongoing open-ended confessional tradition. These indications include the moves the church has made in interpreting the Westminster Confession while refusing to change it, the adoption of the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation (1955), and the adoption of Living Faith/Foi Vivante (1998).

Indications of a "Closed" Confessional Tradition

In the 19th century and early 20th century there appears to have been a tendency within The Presbyterian Church in Canada towards a "closed" or "fixed" confessional tradition, a tradition which exalted the Westminster Standards as the decisive and definitive documents, after the Bible, of the church. This occurred for a number of reasons. First, as William Klempa has noted, "even though the Westminster Confession of Faith was a child of its age" it was quickly recognized as one of the great formulations of Reformed teaching and continued to exercise an enormous influence in the English-speaking Reformed churches over many years.²⁸ As a result, the Westminster Confession was elevated above being one among many statements in a confessional line-up. Secondly, the Westminster Confession of Faith fulfilled a judicial function within Canadian Presbyterianism; i.e. it was accepted as a "subordinate standard" to which all ministers and elders were to subscribe. Thirdly, following the church union crisis of 1925, the continuing Presbyterian Church appealed to its distinctiveness as a confessional church. It meant by this, adherence to "its faith in our ancient and historic standards: the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the larger and shorter Catechisms."²⁹ These factors seem to have militated against an "open-ended" confessional tradition among Canadian Presbyterians.

Indications of an "Open" Confessional Tradition

This is, however, only part of the story. Since 1875 The Presbyterian Church in Canada has on a number of occasions adopted approaches to the interpretation of the Westminster Confession of Faith which indicate that the church's confessional practice has not been as "closed" or "fixed" as it might appear. Indeed, the practice of confessionalism within The Presbyterian Church in Canada indicates that the church staked out a middle ground between two opposing poles: the church did not affirm the Westminster Confession of Faith as a statement of faith which sets forth eternal truths once, for all time, while at the same time, the church refused to relegate the Westminster Confession of Faith to the past alone.

The tension described above already existed at the creation of The Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1875. In order to effect the union of the four streams of Presbyterianism in Canada,

the basis of union had to deal with the fact that there were significantly different opinions on the part of the uniting churches about the church's relationship to the civil magistrate. They accomplished this by including a qualifying statement concerning the adoption of The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. "The Westminster Confession of Faith shall form the subordinate standard of this Church; the Larger and Shorter Catechisms shall be adopted by the Church, and appointed to be used for the instruction of the people, *it being distinctly understood that nothing contained in the aforesaid Confession or Catechism, regarding the power and duty of the civil magistrate shall be held to sanction any principle or views inconsistent with full liberty of conscience in matters of religion*" (italics ours).

The issue requiring the church to include this qualifying statement had a long history in Presbyterianism prior to 1875. In keeping with the debates in Scotland, it was especially Chapter 23, Of the Civil Magistrate, of the Westminster Confession that presented problems to the new presbyteries and synods in the Atlantic Provinces although the churches still "bound themselves resolutely to the Westminster Confession of Faith."³⁰ In 1854 the Free Church passed a resolution which interpreted Chapter 23 of the Westminster Confession as not sanctioning control of the church by the civil magistrate.³¹ When the Secessionist Synod of Nova Scotia and the Free Church Synod united in 1860, Chapter 23 of the Westminster Confession was again clarified and the same happened with the unification of the Synod of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and the United Presbyterian Church in 1861. The 1866 union of the Synod of New Brunswick and the Synod of the Lower Provinces of British North America followed the 1860 formula. In 1875 the Westminster Confession of Faith was adopted as the subordinate standard with the proviso that "full liberty of conscience" be allowed regarding the power of the civil magistrate. In effect, the church included a declaratory or interpretive statement in the very basis of the 1875 union. This set a precedent in which interpretive statements, either adopted by the General Assembly directly, or following the use of a remit under the Barrier Act, became the means through which The Presbyterian Church in Canada interpreted its own confessional standards. Furthermore, while the qualifying statement appealed to the principle of "liberty of conscience" with reference to the civil magistrate in particular, it had the effect of introducing this as a general principle with reference to the confessional standards of the church.³²

This principle was then applied to resolve the next controversy concerning the Westminster Confession. In the 1880s the Presbyterian Church faced a challenge to the Westminster Confession's teaching on the degrees of consanguinity, i.e. its teaching concerning those who were eligible to marry each other as defined by family relationships. Some argued that it was not necessary to forbid, as the Westminster Confession did, marriage to the sister or brother of a deceased spouse. After attempting unsuccessfully to strike the contentious clause from the Westminster Confession by remits under the Barrier Act in 1887 and 1888, the church approved a remit which affirmed that "Subscription to the formula in which the office bearers of the church accept the Westminster Confession of Faith shall be so understood as to allow liberty of opinion in respect of the proposition that "the man may not marry any of his wife's kindred nearer in blood than he may of his own." When faced with the choice of changing the text of the Westminster Confession of Faith or allowing for liberty of conscience, the church opted for the latter.

Developments during the time of Church Union

Liberty of opinion with respect to the confessional standards of the church appears to have been widely practiced and accepted in the years leading up to the church union of 1925. In reply to an overture from the Maritimes Synod, the General Assembly acknowledged that "the tendency of enlightened and earnest people is to give greater scope to the individual and conscience, and not to tie men down to too many points of belief." The reply also acknowledged that "there are several positions taken in the Westminster Confession of Faith upon which liberty of opinion is already allowed." It proceeded to name creation of the world in the space of six days (Chapter 4), the civil magistrate (Chapter 23), and reference to the Papacy (Chapter 25) as examples. However, the report went on to recommend that presbyteries not be granted power to change the standards of the church. Instead, presbyteries were permitted to consider objections to the confessional standards, and when satisfied that such objections do not touch the substance of the

faith and “are not merely capricious, and thoughtlessly taken, to grant liberty to those applying for licensure, with an accompanying explanation.”

In 1914 the General Assembly considered and adopted a recommendation to change the terms of subscription under the Barrier Act. The second question of the ordination vows as proposed by the revision would have required that ministers affirm that the Westminster Confession of Faith as adopted by The Presbyterian Church in Canada in the Basis of Union in 1875 contained “the system of doctrine which is taught in the Holy Scriptures” and faithfully to adhere thereto in their teaching. The recommendation also included a preamble to be used at ordination in which “the Church recognizes liberty of opinion on such points in her subordinate standards as do not enter into the system of doctrine therein - while she retains full authority in any case which may arise to determine what falls within this description.” This remit was sent down under the Barrier Act. In 1915 the Acts and Proceedings records that “only three presbyteries out of seventy-six reported” concerning the remit of 1914 regarding the Standards of Faith. Therefore, it was not approved by the church.

Immediately following the establishment of the United Church of Canada in 1925, the continuing General Assembly unanimously affirmed adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as the subordinate standards for the continuing church. What appeared to some as a move towards pushing the continuing church in the direction of adopting a “fixed” confessional tradition was met with resistance in the years that followed by Walter Bryden, James Smart, and others influenced by the emerging theology of Karl Barth. Barth had argued that the church should look at the Westminster Confession in relation to the 16th century reformers with a view to what the church’s confession must be today.

Later developments towards an “Open” Confessional Tradition

A step was taken towards a more open confessional posture in 1943. At that time the General Assembly adopted a recommendation that a committee “be appointed for the purpose of re-examining our whole confessional position as a church, with a view eventually to stating what we believe, as a Reformed church, in language and concepts relevant to our own day and situation.”³³ In 1945 the Committee on Statement of Faith reported to the General Assembly in the form of a brief statement of faith to be sent down to presbyteries and synods for study and comment. In 1946 the committee was renamed the Committee on Articles of Faith. By the late 1940s the work of this committee began to focus on the need for a statement on church and state. The ambiguity left by the liberty of conscience clause in the 1875 Basis of Union, it was argued, had the effect of leaving “the Church without a confession of faith on this most important doctrine” and introducing “liberty of conscience” as a criterion in matters of faith. This, it was argued further, is “a virtual denial of the Scriptural doctrine of liberty of conscience as set forth in Chapter 20 of the Westminster Confession of Faith.”

The Declaration Concerning Church and Nation was sent down under the Barrier Act in 1954 and finally adopted in 1955. It provided The Presbyterian Church in Canada with a doctrinal statement that, in effect, superseded Chapter 23 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Ironically, however, while the new statement clearly superseded Chapter 23 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the new statement did not replace Chapter 23 in the text itself. The new statement became the law of the church, but the relationship between the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation and the Westminster Confession of Faith and the whole question of subscription thereto was left unclear. Between 1957 and 1970 the Articles of Faith Committee set about the task of addressing this problem by studying the question of subscription to the standards and the ordination questions.³⁴

Following the creation of the Articles of Faith Committee, the General Assembly adopted other reports of the committee that provided interpretative statements and comments on the Westminster Confession of Faith. Such statements indicate a willingness of the church to entertain the possibility that interpretation and comment are both required and appropriate to the church’s ongoing task of confessing the faith. For example, in 1945 the special committee set up to deal with a Statement of Faith reported, “In our opinion, the Westminster Confession of Faith does not properly relate the Church directly to the Creative Word and Spirit of God.” In 1948, the Articles of Faith Committee made a statement on Election and Predestination critical of the Westminster Confession of Faith, especially Chapter 3. “When the Westminster

Confession of Faith proclaims Election and Rejection with equal emphasis in sections 3, 4, 5 and 6, the evangelical character of the doctrine of predestination as good news is jeopardized, if not dissolved.”

In 1962 the church made another strategic move in reformulating its confessional heritage by adopting a recommendation that The Presbyterian Church in Canada “recognize the Second Helvetic Confession, the Belgic Confession, the Gallican Confession (Confession of La Rochelle), and the Heidelberg Catechism as standards parallel to our own.” The force of this recommendation was not clear. It seemed to suggest that it was now possible for ministers and elders, especially those being received from sister Reformed churches, to subscribe to a parallel standard in place of the Westminster Confession of Faith. It also seemed to recognize the appropriateness of appealing to parallel confessional standards in the ongoing task of interpreting the Westminster Confession of Faith.³⁵

During the same period, however, and unlike the American Presbyterian experience, The Presbyterian Church in Canada explicitly rejected attempts to change the historic text of the Westminster Confession of Faith, either by addition, deletion, or modification. As noted above, the 1887 remit which proposed amending The Westminster Confession of Faith by striking out a section of the consanguinity clause was defeated. In 1968, an overture from the Presbytery of Paris requested that certain sections of the Westminster Confession of Faith be omitted, namely those sections critical of the Papacy and Roman Catholic doctrine. In reply, the General Assembly adopted a recommendation which affirmed that, “Since the Westminster Confession of Faith is an historical document, the judgement of our Church has always been that it ought not to be altered, but that, where necessary, a declaratory statement or other explanatory note can be made.”³⁶

These questions were partly addressed, at least indirectly, by the adoption of the new preamble and the ordination questions in 1970. The preamble set the Westminster Confession of Faith in a line-up of ecumenical creeds and reformation confessions, and recognized the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation as standing in that trajectory. Furthermore, it introduced the notion of an “open” confessional tradition clearly by stating that the subordinate standards also include “such doctrine as the church, in obedience to scripture and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, may yet confess in her continuing function of reformulating the faith.” The effect of these changes was to situate the Westminster Confession of Faith historically as a constituent part of the church’s tradition, but not as the sum and substance of that tradition to which nothing could or should be added. They also insisted upon the role of the Holy Spirit speaking in the scriptures in the ongoing interpretation and reformulation of the faith. At the same Assembly, a revised version of the 1948 statement on predestination emphasizing election in Christ was adopted as an interim answer on the church’s position.

Finally, in 1998 the General Assembly adopted Living Faith/Foi Vivante as a subordinate standard, granting confessional status to a statement of Christian belief that had been in use in the church for some fifteen years. As in 1955 with reference to the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation, the General Assembly left the relationship between the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation, and Living Faith/Foi Vivante and the whole question of subscription thereto unclear.

Between 1998 and 2002 questions concerning the possible amendment of the Westminster Confession of Faith were revisited by the General Assembly and its Committee on Church Doctrine. A Declaratory Act stating that The Presbyterian Church in Canada does not see the Pope as antichrist and that the church deplores the legacy of violence and hatred between Reformed churches and the Roman Catholic Church was adopted. At the same time, the General Assembly defeated a motion to re-affirm the 1968 position that the Westminster Confession of Faith is a historical document that should not be altered.

Summary

In summary, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has used eight approaches to the interpretation of the Westminster Confession of Faith as its confessional standard since 1875. These are:

1. Remits under the Barrier Act;
2. Reports of the Articles of Faith Committee and the Church Doctrine Committee;
3. Declaratory Acts;

4. Liberty of Opinion;
5. Adoption of the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation (1955);
6. Adoption of Parallel Reformed Confessions (1962);
7. Situating the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation in a line-up of ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions as per the revised ordination vows (1970);
8. Adoption of Living Faith/Foi Vivante (1998).

These approaches demonstrate how The Presbyterian Church in Canada has sought to affirm an “open” confessional tradition while at the same time honouring its commitment to the Westminster confessional standards which played such a constitutive role in the church’s faith and life. In this sense,

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has chosen to handle its connection with the historic creeds of the Reformed tradition in a unique way ... Canadian Presbyterians produce new statements of faith through which the previous statements are to be understood. We recognize that any subordinate standard is both a living document - as it is read and interpreted in changing circumstances - and that it is also an historic text which points to the faith of church at a particular moment in time. As historic texts we have not changed them - rather we have created new lenses either by adding additional subordinate standards, as in the case of the “Declaration Concerning Church and Nation” and “Living Faith/Foi Vivante, or we have adopted Declaratory Acts or Clauses which have sought to interpret the Westminster Confession in our own time. In this way we have acted to honour the past, respecting the work of our ancestors ... While honouring the past, we have fully acknowledged that each of the historic statements of faith is fallible, and in the continuing process of the Spirit’s building and purifying the church, the church is led to further doctrinal statements which illumine what was not seen, and pinpointing blind spots in the historic document. Leaving the statements unchanged, reminds us of our fallibility as human beings, and causes us to recognize that even doctrinal statements which we make today are also historically and culturally bound and will need to be seen through different lenses in the future.³⁷

To explore further how the above developments in The Presbyterian Church in Canada in relation to its subordinate standards impact on our present situation it is helpful to look at the development of formulas of subscription to subordinate standards in Scotland, the United States and Canada. The formulas of subscription, that ministers of Word and Sacraments, elders, missionaries, deacons, and diaconal ministers subscribe to determine more specifically how subordinate standards function within the life of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The role of Formulas of Subscription in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

In his paper presented to the 1998 meeting of the Presbyterian Society of Church History, William Klempa describes the prominent role the Westminster Confession of Faith has played in the Scottish and Canadian Presbyterian Churches.³⁸ Our formulas of subscription, which are found in the Book of Forms, Chapter X, represent the formal definition of the way the church relates to subordinate standards. They designate and define our sources of doctrine and describe the ordained or designated person’s responsibility and relationship to the subordinate standards, polity of the church, and Christian ethical behaviour. In this sense the formulas of subscription represent the closest thing we have to a code of ethical conduct for ruling and teaching elders, missionaries, deacons as well as diaconal ministers.³⁹ In the case of teaching elders (ministers of Word and Sacraments) agreement to the formulas of subscription is formally signed at ordination and at each new induction to emphasise the solemnity of the minister of Word and Sacraments’ relationship and responsibility to these standards. Diaconal ministers, since 1992, also sign the formula at the time of designation and each time they are recognized. Teaching elders, missionaries and deacons publicly agree to follow the standards of subscription upon ordination. The vows concerning the subordinate standards differ for ministers of Word and Sacraments, in that their teaching role is more clearly described as “upholding its doctrine under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures.” Diaconal ministers and elders promise to accept and be guided by the subordinate standards.⁴⁰

The evolution of our present formulas of subscription can be traced in relation to developments in Scottish and North American Presbyterianism.

Developments in Scotland - "The Substance of the Faith"

After the upheaval of the Episcopal period from 1660-1688 in Scotland, the Westminster Confession and subscription to it gained new prominence. Subscription to the Confession as well as an affirmation that it represents the minister's own faith were required. In 1711 the formula included the following narrow but clear definition of what subscription meant:

I do hereby declare that I do so sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of faith ... to be the truths of God, and I do own the same as the confession of my faith.⁴¹

Already at this time there were signs that such formulas of subscription were considered too confining as some ministers were allowed to sign the formula with an explanation.⁴² During the 1760s to 1770s, moderates who held loose views on the meaning of subscription, held sway in the Church of Scotland and with the rise of Secessionist movements and churches, formulas of subscription developed within these groups that removed the idea of confessing the Westminster Confession as one's own faith. In the newly formed United Presbyterian Church (1847) subscription was an acknowledgement of the Westminster as "an exhibition of the sense in which you understand the Holy Scripture."⁴³

In Scotland subscription to the Westminster Confession developed in the direction of recognising that it contains something described as "the substance of the faith." Thomas Torrance traces this concept back to the act of the Scottish Parliament of 1690 where the phrase the "substance of the faith" is first used. This phrase, however, formally entered a formula of subscription in the United Presbyterian Church only in 1879.⁴⁴ The Church of Scotland would follow this development in 1889 by supporting the idea of subscribing to the Westminster Confession in terms of its representation of "the substance of the faith" in the "Act on Subscription of Office Bearers in the Church." The Free Church of Scotland passed a Declaratory Act in 1892 that emphasised liberty of conscience and also used the phrase "the substance of the faith" with the proviso that the church itself, and not the individual, will determine what matters enter "the substance of the faith."

By the time of the 1929 union of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church, the idea and the definition of "substance of the faith" appeared in the "Articles Declaratory of the Constitution in Matters Spiritual". Torrance argues that these articles reflected Robert Rainy's⁴⁵ view that there are two strata of confessional matter. First there is the "solid core" which cannot be altered without the whole church altering its position. Second there is the "variable element" which could be extended and contracted according to circumstance.⁴⁶ Torrance argues that the "Declaratory Articles of the Constitution in Matters Spiritual" imply in their content and structure that the concept, "the substance of the faith", refers to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. He argues further that these creeds represent above all "the deposit of faith" as handed down by the Apostles which is not in final analysis a body of belief but "the living substance and foundation of faith in Christ and what he has done for us and our salvation."⁴⁷

Thus subscription to subordinate standards developed in the direction of recognising the importance of the "substance of the faith" within those standards in Scotland.

Developments in the United States - "The System of Doctrine"

In the United States subscription followed a slightly different course. Instead of subscription to "the substance of the faith" ministers of Word and Sacraments were asked to agree that they "... receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scripture."⁴⁸ It is obvious from the discussions in 1873 that there was a range of opinions in the US church about the meaning of the phrase "system of doctrine." From Charles Hodge's discussion of the case it is clear that there were those who read it as meaning the substance of doctrine, which afforded them great freedom to interpret what entered into the substance of doctrine and what not. Hodge was Professor of Oriental and Biblical literature at Princeton, New Jersey, where he taught for more than 50 years and exercised an enormous influence in Presbyterian circles in the United States. Hodge's discussion in 1873 clarified the meaning of "system of doctrine" and became very influential in both the United States and Scottish churches.

Hodge argued that agreeing to the Westminster Confession as a system of doctrine does mean that one agrees with the form of the whole system while it does not mean that one necessarily

agrees with every proposition therein. He clarified that the “system of doctrine” includes three classes of doctrine: that which represents the view of the church catholic, that which represents the protestant position, and that which is specifically reformed. Thus agreeing to the “system of doctrine” of the Westminster does not mean agreement with all three classes of doctrine and particularly with regards to Reformed doctrine.⁴⁹ On matters such as divorce, marriage to one’s deceased wife’s sister, and the role of magistrates, Hodge argued that there is freedom of conscience as these do not enter into the “system of doctrine” be it catholic, protestant or reformed. Hodge rejected another interpretation of “system of doctrine” which would interpret it as “substance of doctrine” in the sense that the Scots were describing “substance of the faith.” Thus, within the Presbyterian churches in the United States subscription to the subordinate standards developed in the direction of recognising the “system of doctrine” within those standards.

As the Presbyterian churches were established in Canada they reflected both the Scottish and United States understandings of the meaning of subscription. A particularly Canadian view ultimately developed within The Presbyterian Church in Canada with our present formulas of subscription including a preamble and new vows adopted in 1970.

Developments in Canada

The relationship of the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada with the Westminster Confession of Faith is outlined more fully above. A particularly important influence on Canadian developments has been the 1875 publication of Principal W. Caven, “A Vindication of our Doctrinal Standards”. Caven argued that the Westminster should not be regarded as a supreme standard and that the church could revise “our Formularies ... in harmony with Scripture to secure that their presentation of the truth shall be well suited to the peculiar necessities of the period.”⁵⁰ This argument became the first signal of the 1970s position which (1) allowed that the church could add doctrine in “obedience to Scripture under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit” and (2) affirmed strongly the primacy of Scripture in relation to the subordinate standards (Appendix F, Book of Forms of The Presbyterian Church in Canada).

As indicated above, there has been renewed interest in the subordinate standards of the church especially since the establishment of the “Articles of Faith Committee” by General Assembly in 1943. This renewed interest eventually found expression in new formulas of subscription for ministers of Word and Sacraments, ruling elders, missionaries, deacons and diaconal ministers as per the Book of Forms, Chapter X. The new formulas were approved by General Assembly in 1970.

Traced above are the concepts of “the substance of the faith” originating in Scotland, and the “system of doctrine” originating in the United States, as well as the “open-ended” approach which allows for new doctrine to be added under the “continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures”. All three concepts are evident in the evolution of our understanding of subscription to the subordinate standards within The Presbyterian Church in Canada. As shown above, the Assembly has repeatedly shown a willingness to look critically at the content of the Westminster Confession. The Assembly has not edited the Westminster, but has preferred to deal with issues under contention by means of reports or declaratory statements. The Assembly has affirmed Dr. Caven’s position, on the primacy of scripture and has developed its doctrine, by adding the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation and Living Faith/Foi Vivante to our subordinate standards.⁵¹ The Assembly has also affirmed the idea that it is the role of the whole church to determine our doctrinal position rather than the individual.

The preamble to the ordination vows emphasises the centrality of our responsibility to the living and risen Christ as King and Head of the church. It affirms the primacy of scripture testifying to Christ the Living Word, which reflects Torrance’s opinion on the “substance of the faith”. The preamble also affirms the position that the subordinate standards contain three classes of doctrine by specifically naming these in terms of the ecumenical creeds, the protestant distinctives and specifically Reformed confessions. It also lends a primacy to the ecumenical creeds by naming them first, thus reflecting the Scottish position about the content of the “substance of the faith”, which Robert Rainy described as “... the solid core, which cannot alter unless the conviction of the whole church should alter.”⁵² The preamble also anticipates a continuous reformulation of the faith under the guidance of the Spirit and in obedience to scripture.

The vows that follow the preamble further strengthen this synthesis of positions. The vow concerning submission to government by sessions, presbyteries, synods and General Assembly affirms the corporate responsibility of the church in reading and interpreting the Bible. The vow concerning the subordinate standards reflects both the ideas of agreeing to a "system of doctrine" by alluding to "its doctrine" as well as the idea that such doctrine should always stand the test of scripture as illuminated by the Spirit. In fact this vow specifies "the correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures." This, perhaps, reflects Dr. Caven's argument for a revision of the standards to suit different periods.⁵³

It can be concluded that where ministers of Word and Sacraments, diaconal ministers and ruling elders take the vows of ordination or designation, they bind themselves in two ways to the subordinate standards.

Firstly, they make a respectful acknowledgement of the wisdom and authority of these standards and their role within our understanding of doctrine.

Secondly, the formulas of subscription bind the church and its officers to the subordinate standards in a thoughtful and evaluative role. This role requires them to test continually their relationship to the subordinate standards and their content, against their primary responsibility to the living Christ, their continuing study of the scriptures within the church, and their responsibility to the church catholic through the ecumenical creeds.

PART 3: REPLIES TO SUBORDINATE STANDARDS SURVEY

The survey on the use of subordinate standards elicited responses from 15 presbyteries, 80 ministers, 35 sessions and 20 individual elders, for a total of 150 replies. Although a small number of respondents expressed ignorance and/or lack of interest, the overwhelming majority treated the survey with appreciation and thoughtfulness. Many sessions appear to have used the survey as an opportunity for study and reflection on an area of our church's tradition that has received little attention in our elder training. The lack of knowledge of our confessional tradition is widely deplored and several sessions suggested that we need mandatory workshops on the meaning and importance of subordinate standards. A couple of churches were motivated by their study to implement regular use of Living Faith/Foi Vivante in the Sunday liturgy, and to order copies for every pew.

A few replies (6) declared the subordinate standards to be outmoded and without value. Concern was expressed that they tie us too firmly to the past and prevent change or growth and that our leaders are required to give affirmation to language and ideas completely inappropriate to our current social and ecumenical context. A somewhat larger number felt that the Westminster Confession of Faith should be "retired" but that Declaration Concerning Church and Nation and Living Faith/Foi Vivante remain valid and helpful.

A much larger proportion of ministers who have studied the historical basis of the polity and theology of the church, than of elders whose instruction may have been somewhat haphazard, consider the subordinate standards to be an important expression of our church's faith and ministry. On the whole, a large majority of respondents, whether they use them or not, consider the subordinate standards part of the self-definition of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. "We are a confessional Church."

Definition

Most respondents defined the subordinate standards as statements of belief that are handed down to us from our historic community of faith and which express and summarize the principal teachings of the church and articulate our commonly held faith as Reformed and Presbyterian. As "standards" they provide an instrument by which doctrine and practice can be measured. Some replies suggested that the subordinate standards might be understood as an instruction book or "rules" governing the church.

All agreed that our subscription is hierarchical in nature. Jesus Christ is the only King and Head of the Church, the Living Word to which the Old and New Testaments witness. The subordinate standards are authoritative only to the extent that they are in agreement with scripture and they are under the correction and guidance of the Holy Spirit speaking in scripture. Subordinate standards "sum up", "supplement", "interpret" and "amplify" scriptural teachings.

The responses demonstrate a fairly broad range of understanding of the authority of scripture as the Word of God, but a clear conviction that the subordinate standards are secondary in authority. "The Bible is the rule of God; subordinate standards are the rule of man." "Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. Subordinate standards are not subject to the same inspirational standard." "They are written by the Church though they derive their life and meaning from the infallible Word of God."

Subordinate standards are seen as specific to the theological tradition from which they grow, which our church defines as "reformed and ever reforming." This results in a conception of the standards as living documents, culturally based in a particular moment in history, interpretations of the faith for the particular generation from which they spring. They are often developed as a response to uncertainty specific to their context. As such, they are not written in stone but may be added to, explained or even set aside as circumstances evolve. One writer noted that because a subordinate standard is an historical artifact, each generation requires a new one. The church must continually reaffirm its unchanging faith in language accessible to its current members. This is achieved by consensual recognition through the Barrier Act that a particular contemporary confession is a true and faithful expression of what the church believes.

Purpose

A significant minority of respondents questions the current value or relevance of the subordinate standards, particularly the Westminster Confession and parallel standards. Although their polemical importance within the social and religious context in which they were written is clearly understood, several writers declared them to have interest only as historical curiosities or relics of a former age which should no longer have force within our doctrine or practice. One session wonders whether the Westminster Confession is more of an embarrassment than an aid. Other writers expressed appreciation for the link they provide to the beginnings of our doctrine in the Reformation. The Westminster Confession is called an "historical marker" which, although it is a response to a particular time and situation, shows us whence we have come.

The subordinate standards are understood as statements and definitions of the doctrine of the church, expressive of the "Presbyterian distinctive" in a multi-faith, multi-denominational world. They provide a protective barrier against heretical beliefs as well as a coherent framework for interpretation, consolidation, explanation and illumination of scripture. They are the rule of faith for Presbyterians, a directive for worship and an aid in putting belief into practice. As such they are one of the important teaching tools of our church, a catechetical instrument as well as a source of instruction and challenge for mature Christians. One writer called them "a sort of Cole's notes of the Bible."

Function in Relation to the Bible

Half a dozen or so respondents profess not to know, care, or understand the question about the function of the standards in relation to the Bible. Apart from these, the replies show a clear and almost unanimous understanding that the creeds and confessions are subordinate and cannot replace or stand in conflict with the teachings of scripture. The Bible reflects the culture of its writers and compilers and requires the church of each generation to struggle with the text to discover the Word of God through words that reflect the very human attitudes and values of its cultural context. In the same way, the subordinate standards must constantly submit to critical examination and interpretation under the guidance of scripture. "The Word of God alone is the arbiter of truth. Subordinate standards are fallible and time bound." "The Bible is a map. The subordinate standards are a guide to reading that map." The Bible is the source of revelation of God in God's mighty acts of creation and redemption. Creeds and confessions set down the church's understanding of God's Word in the Bible and the Bible's instruction for our time and generation. Therefore the standards of the church must always be understood as a product of the context in which they were written. They are not an addition or a replacement, not a substitute source of truth or a framework into which proof texts can be poured, but a clarification and explication of the truth that is found in scripture. The subordinate standards must always direct us back to scripture to verify our beliefs.

The subordinate standards consolidate the teachings of the church. They are like strands that collect and organize the Bible's teaching on matters of faith and doctrine and highlight aspects of revelation which the church particularly values at any specific moment in time. As new situations evolve, new articulation is required under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as it leads us

in directions not contemplated by our ancestors. Each new generation must be free to disavow certain teachings found in the subordinate standards if such disavowal is founded on the teachings of Holy Scripture; or a new generation might add to the standards to respond to situations not covered in former teachings.

Subordinate standards should cast a light on the Bible, rather than cloud its teaching or offer loopholes in the law. The text of the Bible is given; the interpretation is not. As one respondent noted, we need to converse with the Living God through the pages of Holy Scripture but to avoid allowing that conversation to be subverted by a conversation with our predecessors in the faith through the creeds and confessions.

Uses

Apart from three respondents who do not use Living Faith/Foi Vivante either because they find it too vague, or in one case, because it uses inclusive language, most replies expressed appreciation for Living Faith/Foi Vivante as a subordinate standard of our church. Although a few elders professed never to have seen it and one or two others noted that though it is in the pews, it is seldom or never used, most replies praise it as a most useful resource. It is used in pastoral conversations, catechism classes and as a gift to new members. Sermons grow out of it, unison and responsive readings are commonly presented and several congregations print sections in the Sunday bulletin on a regular basis. It is commended for its clarity, simple language and relevance to day to day life in faith. One note of complaint was that because it does not adequately address the suffering of Jesus on the cross, it is less useful in addressing the suffering people experience in their lives.

Apart from Living Faith/Foi Vivante, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds receive frequent use in Canadian Presbyterian Churches, most commonly at baptism and communion services, but in several congregations by weekly recitation. The creeds are used for sermons, instruction, Bible study and catechism classes. Some members prefer the older wording to the text printed in the new Book of Praise.

The church is much more divided on the value of the other subordinate standards. The few respondents who knew the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation clearly appreciate it as a clarification of ethics and values around national citizenship, and a few have used it in sermons or studies, but for the most part this document appears to remain a well kept secret.

The majority of writers do not make use of the Westminster Confession. Some profess never to have seen it or to know it only by name; others find it out of date, a barrier to ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, more of an embarrassment than a help. One minister confessed that he had used Westminster in membership classes as an example of what a confession should "not" be like.

Of those who use Westminster, all comment on its presence in ordination vows and many understand it as the basic statement of what the Presbyterian Church believes. It forms a background for teaching and preaching, and one preacher noted the usefulness of the section on adoption into Christ in dealing with an adopted child. The Shorter Catechism is still widely used in teaching; children receive prizes for memorizing it and several congregations use a parallel version of the Shorter Catechism and the Heidelberg for study and reflection. Apart from this, very few respondents make any use of the parallel standards. Many of the elders have never encountered them and did not know that The Presbyterian Church in Canada affirms them. About a dozen of the respondents use the Heidelberg Confession on a regular basis either for personal devotions or in sermons and liturgy.

Should we reprint a collection?

The majority of respondents do not believe that a collection of our standards would justify the effort and expense. Some note that all are easily available on the Internet; others already use the Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Confessions and see little value in duplicating it. Those who would like the subordinate standards in a single volume also want them annotated or accompanied by a study guide. A good subject, theme and scripture index would be helpful.

The majority of writers expressed no opinion on what it might mean for the minister or elder to accept the subordinate standards. Those who did respond understand the standards as a statement of theological unity and purity that can assure us of the orthodoxy of ministers and

elders within the tradition. One writer commented that anyone who cannot accept our subordinate standards should really question whether they belong in our church.

Subordinate standards place us under the discipline of our tradition. This does not mean that our theological and liturgical practice is unchanging, only that our history, tradition and identity are bound together and that we need always to understand how we got to where we are today. Our subordinate standards provide a kind of benchmark of orthodoxy in the Reformed tradition. As members of the church, we try to understand our history at the same time as we must use our minds and exercise liberty of conscience to reject culturally based teaching that is no longer appropriate, such as disparaging references to the Pope and Roman Catholicism.

The subordinate standards remind us that we are part of the church and do not stand alone. At the same time as we reaffirm our continuity with our own tradition, we understand both our common ground with and our differences from other religious traditions.

A common refrain sounded in the replies was that our subordinate standards are inadequately taught both to elders and to professional church workers. Because subscription involves both knowing and accepting the content, if we are going to demand that people accept them, we need to be more intentional in teaching them. Several people noted that because the Westminster Confession is posted on our church's website, users would necessarily assume that it reflects the church's current position, which may be less than helpful to our relations with Roman Catholics. "We need to work harder at responding to questions and getting our message out."

Influence on ministry

Many elders felt that because they do not know very much about the subordinate standards, the standards have no influence on their ministry and that they are poorly equipped to know how their ministers might be influenced. "The influence must be hidden in our minister's preaching." Some felt that the creeds in particular help them to clarify their faith, make things simple and focus attention on what is important. In these ways they are helped to articulate what they believe. The creeds are authoritative but not inerrant - authoritative because of their faithfulness to the revelation of God; not inerrant because they are humanly contrived. Several respondents appreciate the need to wrestle with the older confessions as a way of reminding ourselves of the historical continuity and providing a point of reference for the future. Several people commented that the Shorter Catechism, particularly the first question and response, had shaped their lives and ministry.

Access

Almost all replies asserted that they have access to the subordinate standards if and when they want them, either through their ministers or over the internet, if they do not already possess print copies. It would be useful to remind people of where to look on the internet and to tell them that the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation is an appendix to the Book of Forms.

General

One hundred fifty is an excellent response for a survey of this type, and the quality and thoughtfulness of many of the answers was impressive. However, we should remember that the 150 probably includes the majority of people who are passionately interested in the subject, and that a larger proportion of the other 93 percent of presbyteries, sessions and ministers consider the subordinate standards a less than pressing issue. One clear note of concern, however, is our failure to educate the church on what they mean.

PART 4: CONCLUSIONS

1. Historically and theologically, confession is at the heart of the Christian Church.
2. Reformed churches share the apostolic faith as defined in the ecumenical creeds and particularly their teaching on the Trinity, the person of Christ and the Holy Spirit.
3. Reformed churches trace their approach to confessions to the renewed understanding of the gospel that emerged in the sixteenth century. Reformed churches have produced a great number of confessions reflecting their understanding of the faith in their specific historical situations. These confessions had a twofold purpose: to define the Protestant Reformed faith and to instruct pastors and people in it.

4. All Reformed churches have accepted the scriptures as the supreme standard of faith and life. Creeds and confessions have always been regarded as subordinate to the scriptures.
5. The great number of Reformed confessions points to the fact that they are regarded as provisional and not final in character.
6. The Presbyterian Church in Canada understands itself as a church always reforming according to the Word of God under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is evidenced in the formulation of the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation, Living Faith/Foi Vivante, the preamble and ordination/designation vows, and declaratory statements.
7. It has been the practice of The Presbyterian Church in Canada not to alter confessional standards but rather to deal with changes and clarification by means of new confessional statements or declaratory statements.
8. In taking ordination or designation vows, ministers of Word and Sacraments, Diaconal ministers and ruling elders commit themselves first to God the Father, made known in his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom the Holy Spirit witnesses in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; secondly, to the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the written Word of God, as the canon of all doctrine by which Christ rules the church's faith and life; and thirdly to the confessional heritage of the ecumenical creeds, Reformed Confessions and the subordinate standards of the church, promising to uphold its doctrines under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures.
9. In accepting the subordinate standards, ministers of Word and Sacraments, Diaconal ministers and ruling elders make a commitment to a respectful acknowledgement of the wisdom and authority of the subordinate standards, their role in our understanding of scripture and doctrine, and their guidance in teaching the faith. In promising to uphold the church's doctrine, these church officers make a commitment to be engaged in a thoughtful and evaluative dialogue with the subordinate standards, continually testing their own and the church's adherence to the subordinate standards against their primary responsibility to the living Christ and through continuing study and teaching of the scriptures within the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
10. As a reformed and always reforming church, The Presbyterian Church in Canada provides an orderly process through the courts of the church by which church doctrine may be corrected and formulated.

CONFESSIONS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN HERITAGE

There is a long history of confessing the faith, from the earliest period of the church to the present time. The Preamble to the Ordination Questions of our church recognizes this long confessional heritage. In particular, The Presbyterian Church in Canada acknowledges its adherence to the ecumenical creeds, the confessions of the Reformation and its subordinate standards which are three in number, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Declaration Concerning Church and Nation and Living Faith/Foi Vivante.

THE ECUMENICAL CREEDS

The ecumenical creeds are acknowledged as part of our church's doctrinal heritage. These are five in number: Nicene Creed, Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, Chalcedon Symbol, the Athanasian Creed and the Apostles' Creed. A brief description of each follows:

Nicene Creed (325)

The immediate occasion for the formulation of this creed was a debate about the relationship between God, the Father, described in earlier rules of faith as the Creator, and Jesus Christ, the Son of God, confessed as Redeemer. Arius (250-c.336), an Alexandrian priest, stated that the Word or Son, while more than a mere human being, since all things were made through him, was simply a creature; that is, he was created by God and was not with and not one with God from eternity. At issue, to express it starkly, was whether Jesus Christ was a second-rate god, higher than humankind but less than God, the Father and Creator.

The Roman Empire was fractured by this theological controversy. To settle the issue, the Roman Emperor, Constantine assembled 318 bishops to meet in council at Nicea in 325 AD. A

local rule of faith, similar to the Apostles' Creed, was used as a basis and into it were inserted such expressions as "begotten, not made" and "of one substance with the Father". The latter term "of one substance" (*homoousios*) meant of the same essence or reality and was the formulation of Alexander (d. 328), the bishop of Alexandria and his associate and successor, Athanasius (c. 296-373). When the Emperor called for a vote, all but two bishops approved and signed the creed. The two dissenters were exiled.

The "of one substance" clause was not biblical and during the next fifty years a debate raged regarding whether it was the appropriate phrase. Other terms, such as, "of like substance" (*homoiousios*) were tried. The non-inclusion of a simple iota "i" became a matter of orthodox belief. In 381, another ecumenical council affirmed the declaration of Nicea (without the iota) as the only one which does full justice to the conviction that in Jesus Christ we have to do with no one less than God himself.

John Henry Newman's fine hymn, "Praise to the Holiest in the Height" expresses the significance of the Nicene "of one substance" phrase by speaking of Jesus Christ as "God's presence, and his very self and essence all-divine," affirming that Christ is no less than God's very being. The second verse of the Christmas carol, "O Come, All Ye Faithful" sets this Nicene faith to music: "God of God, Light of light, lo, he abhors not the virgin's womb, very God, begotten not created. O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord."

The Nicene Creed is the most universal of all the creeds since it is the creed of Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and most Protestant churches. It has a threefold structure, the first affirming faith in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; the second, expressing belief in Jesus Christ as God's only begotten Son, begotten before all worlds; and the third, confessing faith in the Holy Spirit. The second article is the longest and central one in the creed.

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)

This creed was the work of 150 bishops who met in a second ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381. It affirmed the theology of Nicea but went beyond it in an important respect. In the original form of the Nicene Creed, the third article ended with "and in the Holy Spirit." The Constantinopolitan Council added the words, "the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets." Later the western church added the words "and the Son" following "Father" in the phrase "who proceeds from the Father." The filioque clause ("and Son") meant "a double procession" of the Spirit, from Father and Son and according to eastern theologians it compromised the unique position of the Father as the sole source of divinity. For the Eastern Church, the addition was not only wrong theologically speaking, but it represented a tampering with the original text of the creed. This contributed to the split between the eastern and western churches that occurred in 1054. Some Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians have suggested that the filioque clause should be dropped but this is not likely to happen in the near future. It has however been omitted in The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada (1983). The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed began to be used in the eucharistic service of the Byzantine church at the beginning of the sixth century. It is this form of the creed that is commonly called, "the Nicene."

Chalcedon (451)

This fourth ecumenical council which met at Chalcedon, opposite Constantinople, addressed the question of the person of Jesus Christ. It affirmed that Jesus Christ was truly God and truly man in one person; that is, in one and not two self-conscious and acting subjects. This affirmation of two natures, human and divine in one rather than two persons, was made over against two current positions. One of these was Nestorianism, which took its name from Nestorius (d., 451?), Patriarch of Constantinople. It held that there were two separate, self-conscious and acting persons in the Incarnate Christ, one divine and the other human. The other was Monophysitism or Eutycheanism, called after Eutyches (c. 378-454). It stated that as a result of the union of the human and divine in Christ, the two natures were mixed together and became one nature and one person. The Chalcedonian Council re-affirmed the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed that Jesus Christ is of one substance or essence with the Father. Over against the Nestorians, it stated that the union of the two natures is without separation and without division; and over against the Monophysites, it asserted that the union is without

confusion or change. The council at Chalcedon did not attempt to solve the mystery of the union of the human and divine in the one person, Jesus Christ, but it tried to set the boundaries in which thinking about the reality of Christ is to take place so that neither the humanity nor the divinity of Christ is compromised. As has been observed, Chalcedon is a rule of faith, much like grammar is a rule or set of rules about the use of language. Chalcedon also speaks of the Virgin Mary as God-bearer (*theotokos*) and not simply as Christ-bearer (*christokos*) as Nestorius preferred to say.

Chalcedon came under severe criticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The words "nature" and "person", it must be acknowledged, pose difficulties. Yet what is at stake ultimately are not philosophical terms such as "nature" and "person" but the Christian confession that the person of Jesus Christ unites the reality of God with the reality of humanity, without separation or division, but also without confusion or change, in a way that is sufficient for our salvation. In other words, the creeds are not philosophical abstractions but a matter of practical and pastoral divinity. Athanasius expressed this pastoral concern well by emphasizing that what is unassumed is not saved and consequently insisted that Jesus Christ has assumed our humanity in its totality and not just a part of it.

Athanasian Creed

Since it is not widely used in our day, a brief comment will suffice. The Athanasian authorship of this creed has been questioned because the creed is not found in the genuine writings of Athanasius and is not referred to by the Constantinople and Chalcedon Councils but contains doctrinal statements that reflect a later period than of Athanasius. It appears to have originated in the western rather than the eastern church. The creed is a clear and precise summary of the teaching of the first four ecumenical councils (Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon) on both the Trinity and the Incarnation interpreted from an Augustinian perspective. The Reformers honoured this creed and it is approvingly mentioned in the Second Helvetic, Gallican and Belgic confessions. Its damnatory clause, "This is the Catholic Faith: which except a man believe faithfully, he can not be saved", grates harshly on contemporary ears and has made its use problematic in public worship.

Apostles' Creed (c. 700)

The legend that the apostles drafted this summary of the faith shortly after Pentecost, each contributing a clause, was questioned by Lorenzo Valla (c.1406-57), the Italian humanist and the reformers, including John Calvin, rejected a direct apostolic authorship. An early form of the creed goes back to a Roman creed (c. 100) which stated, "I believe in God the Father, in the Son Christ, in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the remission of sins and eternal life through the holy Church."

The Apostles' Creed was also influenced by the Interrogatory Creed of Hippolytus (c. 215) which was used at baptismal services, the presbyter asking the catechumens three questions: "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty; Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God; and Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" Other influences include the Creed of Marcellus (340) and the Creed of Rufinus (c. 404). Although the creed did not attain its present form until the eight century, by the fourth and fifth centuries it was widely used in the western church in connection with the instruction of catechumens and was repeated at baptismal services.

The great strength of the Apostles' Creed is its simple narrative form, reflecting New Testament affirmations, which can be learned and grasped by the young. Reformed catechisms used it and gave expositions of its phrases. The creed has a threefold structure revolving around the three Persons of the Trinity. The first article affirms faith in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth and is quite brief. Its second article, which like the Nicene Creed's, is the longest and most central, begins with the word "and". The significance of this connective is to affirm over against the teaching of Marcion that the God of creation is the God of redemption. Jesus Christ, the subject of the second article, was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, was buried, raised from the dead, ascended into heaven where he rules with the Father. The third article affirms belief in the Holy Spirit, the church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and everlasting life. While the creed is trinitarian in form it does not discuss the question of the inner trinitarian relationship, which are the subject and strength of both the Nicene-Constantinopolitan and Athanasian creeds.

CONFESSIONS OF THE REFORMATION

The confessions of the Reformation are too numerous to mention as they include Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican confessions. Brief attention will be given to four Reformed confessions that have been acknowledged by the action of General Assembly in 1962, to be parallel to our subordinate standards. These are: the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Second Helvetic Confession and the Confession of La Rochelle.

The Belgic Confession (1561)

Together with the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession has been the recognized confession of Reformed churches in Holland and Belgium and their daughter churches. The confession was written by Guido de Brès who died as a martyr in 1567 in Brussels and it attempted to show the Spanish authorities that Reformed Christians were law-abiding citizens and not rebels. It was translated into Dutch and adopted by synods of Antwerp (1566) and Dort (1619).

The confession contains thirty-seven articles. They emphasize Reformed distinctives including scripture as normative, the sovereignty of God, election, sin, salvation in Christ alone, the twofold grace of justification and sanctification, good works, the law as a guide for Christian living, Calvin's understanding of the sacraments and the state as God's instrument and vehicle of grace. It is a classic statement of Calvinistic teaching.

Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

With the exception of the Bible, Imitation of Christ and Pilgrim's Progress, no Christian writing has been translated so often and used so widely as this catechism. It takes its name from the university city, Heidelberg in the Palatinate and was drawn up at the request of it Elector Frederick III, the first German prince to accept the Reformed faith. He sought by means of this catechism to reconcile Lutherans, Zwinglians and Calvinists. Its authors were two young theologians, Caspar Olevianus (1536-1585) and Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1587) both of whom had studied under John Calvin in Geneva.

The Heidelberg Catechism is a warm, deeply personal, evangelical and ecumenical confession, representing a moderate form of Calvinism that nowhere speaks of double predestination. It opens with two questions and answers, the first having to do with our only comfort in life and in death and the second setting out a threefold outline. Part one deals with our sin and misery (questions 3-11). Part two discusses how we are redeemed (questions 12-85) and it includes questions on the sacraments. Part three is devoted to thankfulness for our redemption (questions 86-129) and it gives an exposition of the Ten Commandments and the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. The catechism was formulated for the instruction of the young, for use by pastors and teachers and in public worship (divided into fifty-two Sundays), and was intended as a source of sermon themes for afternoon or evening worship.

Second Helvetic Confession (1566)

The Second Helvetic (Latin for "Swiss") Confession followed the first in its structure and content but expanded and improved it. Its sole author was Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), Zwingli's successor in Zurich. He wrote it as part of his last will and testament. It received the approval of Martin Bucer. When Elector Frederick III was tried by Lutherans for heresy, on account of his support of the Heidelberg Catechism, Bullinger offered this confession to him for his defence. The Imperial Diet of Germany, meeting in 1566, dropped all charges against Elector Frederick. He had the confession printed in Latin and German. It was adopted by the churches of Switzerland. The Church of Scotland approved it in 1566, the Hungarian churches in 1567, the French in 1571 and the Polish Reformed Church in 1571 and 1578. It has been translated into French, English, Dutch, Polish, Hungarian, Italian, Arabic and Turkish in addition to the Latin and German.

The confession is moderate in tone and catholic in spirit. It begins with scripture as the source of authority in the church and speaks of the preached word as the Word of God. It rejects the Roman Catholic understanding of tradition as co-ordinate rather than subordinate to scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity is affirmed. Predestination is seen in close relation to Christ in whom we are elected so that we may lead holy lives. We are to have a good hope for all and not engage in idle curiosity about whether many are damned or saved but are to trust in God's grace

and walk in his way. The confession is mainly concerned with the practical life of the church, its worship, church, order, ministry, the sacraments and marriage.

The Gallican/La Rochelle Confession (1571)

The authors of this confession are John Calvin (1509-1564), who wrote the first draft and his pupil, Antoine de la Roche Chandieu (1534-1591). The confession was adopted by the first national Synod of the French Reformed Church held in Paris in 1559. It was then revised and adopted by the seventh National Synod meeting at La Rochelle in 1571. This meeting was moderated by Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Calvin's successor in Geneva, and it was held in the presence of the Queen of Navarre, her son, Henry IV and Admiral Gaspard de Coligny.

The larger version has forty articles. In Calvinistic fashion, the confession begins with belief in one God, revealed in creation and scripture. The Bible is the Word of God and the sure rule of faith by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. To it all customs, edicts and church councils are subject. The Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian creeds are adopted because they are in accordance with the Word of God. With regard to predestination, it teaches that God called out of the corrupt mass those whom he had chosen in Christ, leaving the rest to their condemnation. The Nicene and Chalcedonian Christology is assumed and all ancient and current heresies are condemned. Its teaching on Christ's atonement, his sole intercession, the church, ministry and sacraments is similar to other Reformed confessions. The confession concludes by stating that God has put the sword in the hands of magistrates to suppress crimes against the first as well as the second table of the Decalogue. Not only are we to obey civil authorities but we are also to pay taxes with a good and free will. Those who resist authority, establish a community of goods and overthrow the just order are detested.

SUBORDINATE STANDARDS

Our subordinate standards are now three in number. They are discussed in the order of their adoption by our church:

Westminster Confession of Faith (1646). Adopted in 1875 and 1889

Richard Baxter, the 17th century English Reformed pastor said that he kept the Westminster Confession of Faith next to his Bible. The same can be said of English-speaking Presbyterianism as no other confessional document has been accorded a higher place. Along with the Longer and Shorter Catechism, it has shaped Scottish, and through it the Presbyterianism of its daughter churches, throughout the world.

The Westminster Confession was the work of one hundred and twenty-one divines and thirty lay assessors who met at Westminster Abbey at the call of the English Parliament to achieve a consensus on doctrine, worship and polity for England, Scotland and Ireland. Six commissioners from the Church of Scotland met with the Assembly. Their presence was highly influential in making the work on doctrine, worship and polity Presbyterian in emphasis.

The Westminster Assembly opened on July 1, 1643, in the presence of both Houses of Parliament. Its specific context is the social, political and ecclesiastical strife of the English civil war and the Puritan Revolution. The Assembly was made up of contending parties: Episcopalians, few in number; Presbyterians, the largest group; Independents; and Erastians, who believed that the church was subordinate to the state. Agreement was not always easy to achieve. But the Assembly completed the Form of Presbyterian Church Government in 1645, a Directory of Public Worship also in 1645, the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1646 and The Larger Catechism and The Shorter Catechism in 1648. The English Parliament approved each document but asked the assembly to add scriptural proofs. After 1168 regular sessions (9 am till 1 or 2 pm), the Assembly concluded on February 22, 1649.

The Church of Scotland adopted the Westminster Confession in 1647 and it was ratified by the Estates of the Scottish Parliament in 1649. In Canada, the 1875 union of four branches of Presbyterianism, adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith as the subordinate standard of the new church with the caveat that "nothing in the aforesaid Confession or Catechism, regarding the power and duty of the civil magistrate shall be held to sanction any principle or views consistent with full liberty of conscience in matters of religion." Another caveat was made in 1889 by stating that subscription to the confession permitted liberty of opinion regarding the proposition that "the man may not marry any of his wife's kindred nearer in blood than he may of his own."

The Westminster Confession of Faith is a landmark in the history of Reformed theology and still an important help in Presbyterian faith and practice. It was eminently successful in setting forth the three central principles of the Reformed faith: the glory of God alone, in its emphasis on God's lordship and sovereignty over the whole of creation; Christ alone, in its emphasis on God's redemption of the world in Christ alone, [the Mediator and the means of our being drawn to him; call, justification, adoption, sanctification, faith, repentance, works, assurance]; and the Bible alone, in its emphasis that its authority does not depend on the church but wholly on God, the author thereof. In its chapter 23 on the civil magistrate, the confession gave the civil power authority to call church assemblies. It never arrived at the vision of a free church in a free state.

Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation (1955)

The 1875 Basis of Union of The Presbyterian Church in Canada permitted liberty of conscience regarding chapter 23 of the Westminster Confession of Faith on the power and duty of the civil magistrate. In effect this meant that the relation of church and state was left largely undefined. In the late 1880s, a series of resolutions recommending the complete separation of church and state, were presented to the 1890 General Assembly. The issue was not resolved and it took the crisis of the church conflict with the state in Germany in the 1930s and the resulting Barmen Declaration (1934), to bring the matter before the Canadian Presbyterian Church once again. In 1942, the Presbytery of Paris submitted a memorial to General Assembly, and called on the church to make "a clear and authoritative declaration the doctrine of the liberty of conscience and on the power and duty of the civil magistrate under the Lordship of Jesus Christ." No action was taken at the 1942 Assembly but the next Assembly in 1943 responded to the Paris memorial by appointing a "Committee on Articles of Faith" to consider the issues raised by the Paris Presbytery. This led to the formulation of the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation and its adoption under the Barrier Act procedure in 1955.

The Declaration is made up of twelve brief paragraphs. Its major thesis throughout is that Jesus Christ is "both Head of the Church and Head of the Civil State." The functions of church and state under Christ are to be differentiated and not confused. It is the church's task to serve God in Christ by the proclamation of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and in the life of faith. The state has been ordained to serve Christ in the administration of his justice and benevolence. This formulation shows the strong influence of Karl Barth who emphasized that Christ is Lord over both the church and the state. The Declaration rejects any doctrine that misconceives the church as the religious agent of the state or of the state as the political instrument of the church. At the same time the church should not be aloof from the affairs of the nation. The Declaration states that the church has a duty to denounce and resist every form of tyranny, political, economic or ecclesiastical, especially when the state becomes tyrannical. Yet it must always remember that its weapons and warfare are not of this world.

Living Faith (1984 and adopted in 1998)

Attempts to produce a new statement of faith for The Presbyterian Church in Canada date back to the 1940s but none of these several projects proved successful. Another effort was made in 1981 when General Assembly authorized the preparation of a new statement of faith for the church and a committee of five persons was appointed: The Rev. Dr. Stephen Hayes (convener), The Rev. Patricia Hanna, The Rev. Dr. Douglas Herron, The Rev. David Marshall and The Rev. Dr. Garth Wilson. Two years later the committee completed its work. After consultation with our church's theological faculties, experts on English style and the Committee on Doctrine, the new statement of faith was presented to the church. In 1984, General Assembly received and commended Living Faith, "as an acceptable statement of faith and as useful in worship and study." During the next fourteen years, Living Faith, came to be used so widely in worship and study groups and enjoyed such general acceptance that a proposal was put forward to make it one of our subordinate standards. In 1998, following the use of the Barrier Act procedure, Living Faith was adopted and took its place alongside the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation as a subordinate standard.

Both the style and outline of Living Faith depend on A Declaration of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. This document produced by the Southern Presbyterian Church (around 1980) failed to be adopted by its General Assembly falling a little short of the seventy-five per cent vote required under their Barrier Act procedure. Yet its style and approach proved to be seminal in both Living Faith and A Brief Statement of Faith (1983) of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the re-united northern and southern churches. Living Faith also shows the

influence of the Confession of 1967 (United Presbyterian Church in the United States), Our Song of Hope (Reformed Church of America), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and other Reformed confessions and catechisms.

The style of Living Faith is more poetic than discursive, more narrative than descriptive and, as a result, more metaphorical than theologically precise. As a kind of “prose-poem” it makes for uncomplicated reading for individual study and it is also suitable for unison reading when faith is affirmed in the context of public worship.

Living Faith is a laudable attempt at setting forth “the faith once delivered to the saints”. It seeks to be biblically-based and faithful to the early creeds and reformed confessions. Like the latter, it affirms the deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, the virgin birth, the atonement, the resurrection and ascension, Christ’s second coming, and the authority of the Bible. At the same time, it seeks to explore the social implications of the faith in such areas as the family and sexual behaviour, war and peace, justice and the economy. It grapples with the issues of doubt, unbelief, our mission, and other religions. Strongly doxological in character, it frequently bursts out in joyful praise, as for example after confessing Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension, it says: “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord!” As its title states, it is concerned to present a faith for our day, a living faith.

Endnotes

1. Calvin, John, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul, The Apostle to the Corinthians*, English translation by John Pringle, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948, Vol. 2, p. 208-09.
2. Harnack, A., *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, Leipzig: Hinrich, 1924, p. 394f., quoted by Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 200.
3. Cf. G. Wainwright, p. 201.
4. Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV/3, edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962, p. 859-901.
5. Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV/3, p. 888.
6. See Robert W. Jenson’s article, “The Bible and the Trinity” in *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. XI, No. 3, Summer 2002, p. 329-39, in which he argues that the “doctrine of the Trinity and Chalcedonian - in fact Neo-Chalcedonian - Christology are, in appropriate fashion, indeed in the Bible, and most especially in the Old Testament”, p. 329.
7. Leith, John H., ed. *Creeds of the Churches*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1963, p. 13.
8. The Apostles’ Creed was, of course, not written by the apostles but was the culmination of several centuries of reflection on what is central to the Christian faith.
9. This key clause repudiated the teaching of Arius that Jesus Christ, the Son was a creature, that he was made by God, had a beginning and was not eternal. The implication of Arius’s teaching was that Christ was less than God.
10. Eastern and Western churches are divided over whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone as Orthodoxy teaches or from the Father and the Son, as is expressed in the filioque (and the Son) clause, which was added in the ninth century by the western church.
11. *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada*, Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985, p. 645.
12. Wainwright, Geoffrey, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 188-89.
13. Cf., Karl Barth’s, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. by Darrell L and Judith J. Guder, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, p. 3-6. Barth goes so far as to assert: “I regard it as proven that the difference between Scripture and confession according to the teaching of the Formula of Concord is in fact only a quantitative one and not qualitative” (6). Years later, in his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth is more circumspect. There he poses the question whether in so exalting the *Augustana*, Lutheranism is not in danger of raising it to the level of a second source of revelation, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, trans. by G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956, p. 658.
14. Schaff, Philip, *The Creeds of Christendom*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877, Vol. I, p. 8.
15. The “Basis of Union”.
16. Leith, John H., *Creeds of the Churches*, p. 127.

17. Barth, Karl, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, p. 16.
18. Schaff, Philip, *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. I, p. 389-90, quoted by John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, p. 127-28. Note also the words of George Wishart (1536) quoted in the Introduction to *Living Faith*: "It is not our mind to prescribe a certain rule of the faith to all churches, for we know no other rule of faith but the Holy Scriptures; and therefore we are well contented with those who agree with these things, although they use another manner of speaking." These appear to be a repetition and paraphrase of Bullinger's and Jud's words. Cf. *Living Faith*, Winfield: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1984, p. 3.
19. Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter 1 in John H. Leith's, *Creeds of the Churches*, p. 132.
20. See among many passages: Romans 1:1-7; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 2:18-22; Titus 3:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 John 4:13-15.
21. Cf. the sections on the Nicene Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and Chalcedon in the appendix for a fuller discussion.
22. Cf. The Scots Confession, chapter 1; Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 24-64; The Second Helvetic Confession, chapter iii; The Belgic Confession, Articles 1, 8-11; Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, etc..
23. The Barmen Declaration, 1, in John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, p. 520.
24. Cf. Karl Barth, *The Theology of Reformed Confessions*, p. 26ff. Barth employs an analogy to illustrate the difference: "The Reformed formation of confessions is, seen as a whole, not a frozen river like the Lutheran, on which one could walk ... It is rather a freely flowing river, in which one can only swim, despite the bulky bodies it carries along" (27). It may be questioned whether this antithesis is historically accurate. Not only has Lutheranism shown flexibility in interpreting its confessions, but also some Reformed confessions, for example the Westminster Confession of Faith, have been regarded by some as "for all posterity" (the term employed in the Formula of Concord to describe the Augsburg Confession).
25. Schaff, Philip, *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol II, p. 438.
26. *Ibid.*, II, p. 670. Karl Barth is mistaken when he states that the Westminster Confession is the only exception to the general practice of Reformed confessions to assert the capacity for error on the part of synods and councils: cf., *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 19. Footnote 181 (p. 238) indicates that Barth has Westminster 31:3 in mind and has failed to notice 31:4.
27. Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998. Rohls writes: "In Lutheranism the process of confessional development came to a conclusion with the Formula of Concord (1577) and the Book of Concord (1580). On the Reformed side there is nothing that corresponds to this conclusion." In the introduction to this book, Jack L. Stotts comments: "The Reformed sector of the Protestant Reformation is one that holds to what can be called an open rather than a closed confessional tradition. A closed tradition holds a particular statement of beliefs adequate for all times and places. An open tradition anticipates that what has been confessed in a formally adopted confession takes its place in a confessional line-up, preceded by statements from the past and expectant of more to come as times and circumstances change. Thus, the Reformed tradition - itself a wide river with many currents - affirms that, for it, developing and adopting confessions is indeed an obligation and not an option. These contemporary confessions are recognized as extraordinarily important for a church's integrity, identity, and faithfulness. But they are also acknowledged to be relative to particular times and places. This occasional nature of a Reformed confession is as well a reminder that statements of faith are always subordinate in authority to Scripture." p. ix.
28. William Klempa, "Canadian Presbyterianism and the Westminster Standards," *Papers of the Canadian Presbyterian History Society*, 1998, p. 51.
29. Acts and Proceedings, 1925, p. 108.
30. Klempa, p. 42.
31. Brian Fraser cited in Klempa, 1988, p. 43.
32. For a fuller discussion of this history, see John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of The Presbyterian Church in Canada*, Don Mills, Ontario: Presbyterian Publications, 1987.
33. Acts and Proceedings 1943, p. 131.
34. By 1957 the Articles of Faith Committee recommended that the relationship between these two documents be addressed through clarifying the meaning of subscription.
35. Acts and Proceedings 1962.
36. Acts and Proceedings 1968.
37. Peter Bush, "Lecture on the Doctrinal Moves of the PCC Since 1875".
38. Klempa, W., "Canadian Presbyterianism...", 1998.

39. Strictly speaking it is specifically question 4 of the ordination vows of teaching elders, and question 4 for diaconal ministers as well as possibly question 4 for deacons that defines a code of conduct. However, agreement to the other questions also implies a kind of ethic of behaviour that includes the oversight of the church and the teaching of our standards.
40. Book of Forms, Appendix F.
41. Hamilton cited in Klempa, 1998, p. 40.
42. Klempa, 1998, p. 40.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
44. Torrance, T., "The Substance of the Faith," in *The Future of Reformed Theology*, Willis, D., and Welker, M, eds., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, p. 167-177.
45. Robert Rainy was Professor of Church History at New College in Edinburgh since 1862 and became principal in 1874. He exercised a great influence on developments in Scottish Presbyterianism.
46. Torrance, 1999, p. 169.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
48. Hodge, Charles, "Adoption of the Confession of Faith," in *Discussions in Church Polity*, Hodge, A.A., ed., New York: Scribner & Sons, 1879, p. 318.
49. Hodge defined these doctrines as the "imputation of Adam", "sinful, innate depravity of nature", "Christ came in the execution of the covenant of redemption ..., and rendered their (His people's) salvation certain", "gratuitous personal election to eternal life", and "the perseverance of the saints", Hodge, 1879, p. 333.
50. Caven cited in Klempa, p. 45.
51. Klempa, 1998, p. 45.
52. Torrance, 1999, p. 169.
53. "Nay, apart from any challenge given, it may be right and proper that our Formularies should at times be carefully revised so as to have them not only in harmony with Scripture but to secure that their presentation of the truth shall be well suited to the peculiar necessities of the period." Cited in Klempa, p. 45.

Recommendation No. 1 (adopted, p. [25](#))

That the report, *Confessing the Faith Today: The Nature and Function of Subordinate Standards* be the response to the Additional motion, A&P 1998, p. [42](#).

Recommendation No. 2 (adopted, p. [25](#))

That the report, *Confessing the Faith Today: The Nature and Function of Subordinate Standards* be the response to Overture No. 4, 1999, Overture No. 20, 2000, Overture No. 6, 2001, and Overture No. 13, 2002.

Recommendation No. 3 (adopted, p. [25](#))

That the General Assembly commend the report, "Confessing the Faith Today" to be circulated for use in the church.

Recommendation No. 4 (adopted, p. [25](#))

That a compact disc be produced (and link to the PCC web page) consisting of the report, *Confessing the Faith Today*, and the texts of the ecumenical creeds, the confessions of the Reformation which the church has recognized as parallel standards, and the subordinate standards.

THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL AND THE MARKET ECONOMY (A&P 1997, p. [235-54](#), [36](#); A&P 1998, p. [238-39](#); A&P 1999, p. [237](#); A&P 2000, p. [237](#); A&P 2001, p. [255](#); A&P 2002, p. [237](#))

The committee expects to be able to review the edited document by the fall of 2003. Once the review is completed the study guide will be made available for use in the church.

OVERTURE NO. 25, 2001 (A&P 2001, p. [566](#), [16](#); A&P 2002, p. [238-41](#), [21](#))

Re: The theology and practice of ordination to the ruling and teaching eldership

Following last year's response to Overture No. 25, 2001 we have explored the related matters and present them in a report entitled, "The Theology and Practice of Ordination in The Presbyterian Church in Canada: A Study Paper".