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EDITOR'S NOTE: COVID-19 caused many disruptions in plans. One was that the Spring 2020 issue of Presbyterian History was not published. This issue is the only one that will be published in 2020. It exists primarily as an electronic document. However, if you wish to have a hard copy please contact the Editor at 360 Tower St. N., Fergus, ON N1M 2N7 or e-mail pete.bush@wightman.ca.

The Church, Its Subordinate Standards, and the Ordination Questions

by Peter Bush

When in 1954 the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada adopted The Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation as a subordinate standard of the denomination a number of questions arose, not about the Declaration but about what it meant to have adopted an additional standard, and what relationship the new standard had to the previous standards. An overture from the Presbytery of East Toronto (1955, Overture 46), put the problem in these terms, “there is confusion in the Church regarding the relation of office-bearers to the Westminster Standards as formulated in the ordination and induction vows.” Clergy at their ordination and at subsequent inductions were asked the following question: “Do you believe the Westminster Confession of Faith, as adopted by this Church in the Basis of Union, to be founded on and agreeable to the Word of God, and in your teaching do you promise faithfully to adhere thereto?” In adopting the Declaration, the denomination was saying that a portion of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the section dealing the church-state relations (Chapter 23) was being replaced, did that imply that the whole of the Confession was open to being replaced? If part

could be replaced, did that mean the rest of the Westminster Standards was to be regarded as having less authority?

The overture having raised the question proposed an answer, suggesting two principles central to understanding the relationship clergy should have to the subordinate standards, including the Westminster Confession of Faith. First, that while the ordination question “does not imply any doctrine of infallibility” of the Westminster Confession, those answering the question in the affirmative were bound “to acknowledge its worth as a true work of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and to honour it in all their teaching.” The Westminster Confession of Faith was not Scripture, no claim was being made it was infallible, however it was to be recognized as a work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. And as such the Confession was to be treated with respect and its formulation of the faith was to be honoured in the preaching and teaching done by Teaching Elders. The same would be true of all future doctrinal statements which became subordinate standards – they were to be treated with respect. The second principle being, “The Church has a continuing function,

under the Word and Spirit of [the church's] Lord to explicate the faith in responsibility to [the church's] changing circumstances." The church had a responsibility to explain the Christian faith anew to each new generation, such explanation being formed under the authority of the Word of God – which was probably meant to refer to both the Bible and Jesus, also referred to as the Word – and the Holy Spirit, here referred to as Jesus' Spirit. Naming the Holy Spirit in this way referenced Jesus' words in John 16:13-15, that the Spirit will only speak what is from Jesus. The renewed explication of the faith is under the guidance of Jesus Christ, through the action of the Holy Spirit, as the church reads the Bible in its particular time and place.

The Committee on the Articles of Faith (the predecessor to the Committee on Church Doctrine) responded the following year to the overture, affirming the two principles. In the process, the Committee made clear the grounding upon which the second principle for the church explicating the faith anew stood – "the Holy Scriptures abide" as the "canonical standard" with "Jesus Christ" as the church's "sure foundation." Thus, new doctrinal affirmations would need to stand on the foundation of Jesus and be informed by the witness of Scripture.

The Committee seeking to avoid any confusion in the church on the matter, framed three new ordination questions to replace the first two that had been asked at every ordination and induction since 1878. The first question related to Jesus role as Incarnate Saviour and Head and Source of the church. This question covered ground that had not been present before in the ordination questions. The second question related to the Bible, picking up on themes that had been present historically in the first ordination question. And the third proposed question was to replace the one cited earlier in this article, it read (A&P 1956, 503):

The Westminster Confession of Faith was not Scripture, no claim was being made it was infallible, however, it was to be recognized as a work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.

Do you believe the historic creeds and confessions of the Catholic Church, though corrupted in varying degrees by the errors of [human beings], to be a work of Christ's grace in His Body by His Spirit; do you believe that God wrought mightily to restore the sovereignty of His Word in the Church by the Protestant Reformation; and do you receive the Westminster Confession of Faith and doctrine subsequently declared in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, as a holy inheritance

which you vow to cherish and defend in all your teaching, with full regard to the Church's continual task of formulating

for every generation the Faith once delivered to the saints?"

This question of over 100 words, awkward as it is, lifts up the ecumenical creeds of the church, giving them a place they had not had previously and locates the Westminster Confession of Faith within the stream of the church seeking to understand the faith Jesus called the first disciples to live and proclaim. This move highlights the contingent nature of any generation's expression of the faith, along with the contingent nature of any proclamation of the faith from a particular geographical region of the world. All such statements are to be understood as the work of Jesus Christ in the body of the church in that time and place. As signs of Christ's grace among the people of God such statements are to be affirmed as signs of God's working. These statements are an inheritance of Jesus' revelation to people through time, and are inheritance passed on to each new generation to be cherished and defended. The implication being that those who deride and ridicule such creeds and confessions are disrespecting the work of the Spirit of God in the church.

In 1957, the Articles of Faith Committee reported that the feedback they had received from the church affirmed the two principles articulated in the overture and by the 1956 Assembly, but the challenge remained how to describe the balance between the two principles which were in tension with each other. The Committee wrote, “Our concern is that the [ordination] vows shall joyfully affirm our binding to Jesus Christ our Lord, as testified to in Holy Scriptures and as confessed by the Church in creed and life.” (A&P 1957, 229) The word “binding” is important here. In saying “yes” to the ordination vows the ordinand was willingly, joyfully standing under the creeds and confessions of the church. The voices of the past, heard in the creeds and confessions, were to be acknowledged for their work in struggling with Scripture and the Spirit to hear the voice of Jesus and were to have a place as an interpretative norm in the life and teaching of Ministers of Word and Sacraments. This called for humility before the Spirit who has spoken in the past. The ordinand was also to recognize their humility in the present moment, for just as the Westminster Confession of Faith states, all human attempts to speak of the Triune God of grace are fallible. Any voice that claims to speak for God does so with the deep acknowledge, “I could be wrong.” The gospel – pure and true – is articulated by the clay jars that are human beings. Human beings who are fickle and fallible. Finally, those affirming the vows understood that just as they looked at the past statements of the church with skeptical eyes, future generations would look at them with the same eyes. All new creedal statements would be eventually judged by the future, such awareness should give all those struggling to articulate the faith anew humility. Even the present generations finest work would never be more than a “interpretative norm”,

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there was only one “permanent norm”, the Scriptures, and no one was adding to that. Instead the Spirit had been given to bring people back to the Word of God, Jesus Christ, that Jesus might be glorified.

As a result of feedback to the three proposed ordination questions and the discussion of the Church’s relation to its standards, the Committee came to the 1958 Assembly with a new approach.

(A&P 1958, 246-248) A preamble to the ordination questions was proposed, moving much of the cumbersome language in the questions to the preamble leaving the ordination questions

almost unchanged from their 1878 form. The 1878 questions had had no set preamble; the creation of a prescribed preamble was an addition to the ordination practice of the denomination. The draft preamble articulated the tension between on the one hand that: for The Presbyterian Church in Canada the “faith is embodied in the Westminster Confession of Faith which is our subordinate standard, the doctrine whereof we hold and maintain in all our teaching”, and on the other hand “having due regard to the Church’s continuing function, under the Word of God and the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, to explicate and formulate from time to time the faith once delivered to the saints, in agreement with Holy Scripture.” Again, the humility needed to walk the balance is evident. The Westminster Confession is the interpretative norm against which the teaching and preaching of the church is to be evaluated. That norm in turn is not allowed to become permanent because of the higher norm of Word and Spirit bringing the church ever more into agreement with “Holy Scripture.” The ultimate determination of whether the church is in agreement with Scripture lies with the church, for “Of this agreement the Church shall be sole judge.” The church was to determine if it

was in line with Scripture. While this sounds like self-policing, it is in fact a defense of the Reformed Tradition's affirmation that not secular, civil or political power has authority over the church, the only Head of the Church is Jesus Christ, the Church's Sovereign Ruler.

Over the next three Assemblies various revisions of the preamble and ordination questions circulated in a study and report process within the denomination. The

Committee was insistent that the Preamble and the Questions could not be separated, saying, "the Preamble forms and integral part of the terms of subscription, since the Ordination Questions

are so directly contingent upon it as to lose their significance if disassociated from it." (A&P 1960, 280) The whole belonged together, the questions had meaning only in connection with the preamble.

By 1962 the Committee believed the Preamble and Questions were ready to be sent down to Presbyteries under the Barrier Act to become the practice of the church on ordination. But the 1962 Assembly instructed the Committee to prepare "a shorter alternative preamble for use in public service of ordination" and that this shorter alternative would be included with the longer preamble that had been worked on for the last four years.

From the terse tone of its 1963 report, the Committee was not pleased with being forced to produce a shorter preamble. That shorter preamble is almost identical to the one used at the present time at ordination and induction services. It neatly seeks to retain the balancing act between the two principles articulated in the 1955 overture. The first paragraph ends with a description of the role of "pastors and teachers", that would be ministers, saying "The standards of [Christ's] church [Christ] entrusts in a special degree of responsibility to their care." (A&P 1963, 300) The standards of the

Church are a trust, as a trust they are to be cherished and defended, to use the language of the original overture, by those who are charged with the care of the trust. Clergy bear a special responsibility for the care of the standards, ensuring the trust is capable of being passed on. Clergy have a responsibility to the future to pass on what they themselves have received. The second paragraph of the preamble names the standards, including Je-

sus Christ, the Scriptures "as the canon of all doctrine", and the subordinate standards of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation. Also included are

"such further doctrine as the church may from time to time confess in obedience to Jesus Christ." This commitment to obeying Jesus flows back into the opening sentence of the paragraph which reminds the church that it is bound "only to Jesus Christ." The call is present again to follow Jesus' lead as the church seeks to articulate the faith in the new time and place in which it is located.

After a two-year break from the Preamble and Questions during which the committee produced a major paper on the meaning of ordination, the Committee returned in 1966 with eight ordination questions. Having had the Preamble dramatically shortened, the Committee sought to put some of the lost content back into the questions since they regarded the Preamble and questions as being all of a single piece. The proposed question related to the subordinate standards was:

Do you take into your hands the Subordinate Standards received and confessed by thus Church, believing them to be founded upon the testimony of the Word of God, and accepting your responsibility to share in the Church's continuing duty to examine and reform them as the Word of God and the Holy Spirit shall direct; and do you promise to be

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diligent in interpreting and promoting them among God's people?

The double principles of having been entrusted with what the Church through the ages has confessed in the subordinate standards as being the interpretative norm for the reading of Scripture is balanced with the equally serious task of examining and reforming the Creeds and Confessions in the light of Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Added to this balance is the charge to diligently interpret and promote the doctrines espoused in the standards to the people of God. With this the question shapes the preaching life of the Teaching Elders of the church around the standards as their hermeneutical launch point into the Scriptures.

As anyone who has attended an ordination or induction service knows the question quoted above is not one of the questions asked. By the 1969 Assembly the shortened preamble with some small edits from the 1963 version together with four questions were sent down under the Barrier Act and were approved by the Church. So that in 1970, the fifteen-year process of defining the church's relationship to its standards reached a point of completion for the moment. A paragraph linking the Preamble to the Questions stated, "All these things you have examined and are ready to accept." Included in what had been studied and accepted by the ordinand was the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Declaration of Faith concerning Church and Nation. The question relating to the standards reads: "Do you accept the subordinate standards of this church, promising to uphold [the Church's] doctrine under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures?" The two principles are still present. While the question leans towards the examination of the creeds in the light of the continuing witness of the Holy Spirit speaking in continuity with Jesus as revealed in the Scriptures, the preamble to which it is bound reminds the church that pastors and teachers have been entrusted with the care of the standards of the church.

Minor changes were made to the Preamble and Questions in 1992 and 1998. In 2020, the Church Doctrine Committee in response to two overtures

about the preamble and edict proposed substantial changes as they seek to make the "language current and accessible." In the space remaining we turn to look specifically at what the proposed preamble says about the standards of the church. The standards are "fruits of the faith of our forebears as they sought to be faithful to God." These statements are to be referred to as the church in the present moment seeks to "read and interpret the Scriptures." They are signs of God's Spirit at work in the past, and are worthy of being acknowledged as such, but Ministers of Word and Sacraments in the present stand in a "thoughtful and evaluative role" in relationship to the standards. [Remembering that the standards now include Living Faith along with the Confession and the Declaration.] A "thoughtful and evaluative" stance clergy are to take up, while taken from the document "Confessing the Church Today" (A&P 2003, 247-272), is quite different than the image of having been entrusted with "a special degree of responsibility" for the standards of the church. The move from trustee to evaluator fundamentally changes the way the church understands the role of clergy. The first principle affirmed by the Assembly in 1956 of cherishing and defending has been replaced by evaluation with its implicit sense of critique. Meanwhile the second principle of rearticulating the faith under the guidance of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit remains in place. For the proposed preamble states, unchanged from the present preamble, "and such doctrine, in obedience to Scripture and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, may yet confess in the church's continuing function of reformulating the faith." With the understanding of the first principle changed and the second principle unmoved, the creative tension brilliantly articulated in the 1955 overture has been lost. A tension that the Articles of Faith Committee strove for fifteen years to have rooted in the Preamble and Ordination questions. A tension that has served the church well for half a century for it articulates as a positive the tension present within the church itself.

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Reading World Christian-ly: For the good of the Reign of God

by Peter Bush

About four years ago I had the privilege of teaching a course in theology to a group clergy from Africa who had recently arrived in Canada. Many of them had come as refugees, fleeing various forms of ethnic cleansing and persecution. We were reflecting on the mystery of the incarnation – that in Jesus Christ the divine became human. And that Jesus held humanity and divinity together in perfect harmony. I was waxing eloquent – at least I thought I was – in the terms and models that come from the European and North American worldview. I was surprised to discover that I needed to spend almost no time talking about the divinity of Jesus, that was understood as a given for the members of the class. The humanity of Jesus proved much more challenging. I won't go into all the details – but the breakthrough came when one of the students said, "So you are saying that Jesus was hungry like the children in my village are hungry. That Jesus was thirsty and wanted to drink the bad water that was at hand because he was so thirsty, but he knew he couldn't do that or he would get sick. So, Jesus understands the human needs of the people of my village." There more eloquently than I could have said it was one of profound implications of saying that Jesus was fully human, along with being fully divine.

In 1910, 80% of the Christians in the world lived in Europe and North America. In 2010, 38% of the Christians in the world lived in Europe and North America. By 2050 the projections are that number will be 25%. The majority of Christians alive today live outside of North America and Europe. But the impact of Majority World Christianity in all of its complexity and energy has had little impact in the North American church – and more specifically on congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

I realize, particularly in the middle of a global pandemic, that practicing the welcome necessary to be a multi-ethnic congregation is difficult. As

well, some congregations are in locations where the multi-ethnic flavour of world Christianity is not likely to be evident in the pews. But that does not mean it is impossible for monochromely "white" congregations to develop a world Christian awareness. What I hope to do in this short essay is highlight some sources that will assist clergy and lay people in developing a world Christian worldview. I am proposing that leaders in local congregations start learning about the world Christian church by reading.

World Christian thinkers and writers have been with us a long time, we just do not recognize them as such. For example, Augustine was from Africa. After the Middle East the gospel went first to Ethiopia (Africa) and then to Europe.

More recently (1950s and 1960s) writers like the South Asian Biblical scholar D.T. Niles; the Chinese writer about the deeper spiritual life Watchman Nee; and the Taiwanese Presbyterian theologian Shoki Coe raised the awareness of the Eurocentric church that there was a growing vibrancy in Christian thought coming from places other than Europe and North America. Over half a century later the seeds planted by these and other pioneers have produced fruit and it is to the peril of local North American congregations that their leaders ignore what is happening. World Christianity is here to stay and either "white" churches find ways to partner with what is emerging, or they will be left behind.

History: Any conversation about essential reading on world Christianity must include Lamin Sanneh's, *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Eerdmans, 2003).

Dyron Daugherty's *Rising: The Amazing Story of Christianity's Resurrection in the Global South* (Fortress, 2018) joins a growing number of books that demonstrate that the future of Christianity is in the hands of the Majority World and the gospel

has a vibrancy and power in Africa, South America, and Asia that is largely lacking in the global North. These histories, along with Daugherty's, help readers listen to the news with new understanding and enter into a more helpful dialogue with other church members about the shift that is underway in global Christianity.

Even the way mission history is being written is changing as demonstrated by the Canadian historian, Jane Samson's, *Race and Redemption: British Missionaries Encounter Pacific Peoples, 1797-1920* (Eerdmans, 2017). The title implies a reciprocity between missionary and the peoples they encounter. The new mission history is interested in the agency exercised by the receivers of the gospel message.

Personal Journey: Two kinds of journey are being told. Some people from the global South, like Lamin Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African* (Eerdmans, 2012) are telling their story in the idiom and style of their culture, describing their journey to faith. Thereby adding to the collection of testimonies which are at the heart of the Christian story.

A second kind of journey is described North American academics who have had their minds "turned south" towards the global south. Baker Academic has three books in its series, of which Mark Noll's *For Every Tribe and Nation* (Baker, 2014) is an excellent example of this genre. Noll brilliant and humble is certainly worth the read.

Theology: First published by Eerdmans the Majority World Theology series brings together chapters from a range of world Christian theologians who think about the core doctrines of the church from within their context and cultural matrix. Themes included the Trinity, Christology, the Holy Spirit, Salvation, the Church, and Eschatology. What these writers do is expose the culturally bound ways in which North American theologians of all stripes write theology. The blind spots in the Eurocentric theological constructs that most clergy have been trained with are revealed, opening conversation to revitalized theological engagement.

The brevity of the chapters allows readers to wrestle with a manageable amount of material as they begin to explore how various world Christian communities approach the core tenets of the faith. The entire series is being reprinted by IVP in December 2020.

Emmanuel Katongole's *Born of Lament; The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Eerdmans, 2017) takes readers into the lament in Africa's soul, a lament that lives in hope of what is not seen, yet is still hoped for. A hope resting not in the power of the state, but in the Spirit of God at work in the people. This re-thinking of political hope offers the North American church a way to engage the increasingly partisan nature of public discourse.

Biblical Studies: Preachers are influenced by the Biblical commentaries they read and so it is useful to ask who are preachers reading to help them understand the Biblical texts for any given Sunday. Two important sources of commentary on the Biblical text from a non-Eurocentric worldview are the *African Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 2006) (1,585 pgs involving 70 African scholars) and the *South Asian Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 2015) (1,800 pgs). My copy of the *African Bible Commentary* gets visited frequently in my sermon preparation.

The Asia Bible Commentary Series is seeking to have Asian scholars provide commentaries on each book of the Bible. The definition of Asian scholar is either someone from outside of Asia who has taught for a significant period of time in Asia, or alternative was born and raised in Asia and may or may not be teaching and working in Asia.

Reading non-Eurocentric commentary on the Biblical text helps me move out of the cultural context I assume as normal, to see the text through different eyes.

My plea remains – it is urgent that people in The Presbyterian Church in Canada begin to read and engage with writers and thinkers outside of North America and Europe.

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An Historical Vignette

Since the lead article in this issue is about the Subordinate Standards of the Church, including the Westminster Confession of Faith, it seemed appropriate to have the historical vignette for this issue come from the Confession. Here then is chapter 31 on Church Synods and Councils. The Scripture references are the texts supporting the statements in each section. Section 4 of the chapter is particularly illuminating and functions as a cautionary word to the church.

31. Of Synods and Councils

1. For the better government, and further edification of the Church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils. (1)

(1) Acts 15:2, 4, 6

2. As magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers, and other fit persons, to consult and advise with, about matters of religion; (2) so, if magistrates be open enemies to the Church, the ministers of Christ of themselves, by virtue of their office, or they, with other fit persons upon delegation from their Churches, may meet together in such assemblies. (3)

(2) Isa. 49:23; I Tim. 2:1, 2; II Chron. 19:8, 9, 10, 11; II Chron. 29, 30 chaps.; Matt. 2:4, 5; Prov. 11:14

(3) Acts 15:2, 4, 22, 23, 25

3. It belongs to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his Church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in His Word. (4)

(4) Acts 15:15, 19, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31; Acts 16:4; Matt. 18:17, 18, 19, 20

4. All synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both. (5)

(5) Eph. 2:20; Acts 17:11; I Cor. 2:5; II Cor. 1:24

5. Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude, nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth; unless by way of humble petition, in cases extraordinary; or by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate. (6)

(6) Luke 12:13, 14; John 18:36

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