



The Westminster Confession: Unfinished business

Finlay A. J. Macdonald

Between 1972 and 1974 the Church of Scotland considered a proposal to change the status of the Westminster Confession of Faith from ‘principal subordinate standard’ to ‘historic statement of the faith of the Reformed Church’. Under the process for amending the Articles Declaratory the proposal received overwhelming support, gaining the endorsement of the General Assemblies of 1972 and 1973 and the approval of two-thirds of Presbyteries in two successive years. However, at the 1974 General Assembly the final vote was lost to a counter-motion to depart from the matter until the General Assembly had approved a new Statement of Faith.

In 1992 the General Assembly did approve a new Statement of Faith, but by then there was no great appetite for returning to the business left unfinished eighteen years previously.

This paper offers some general background to the church’s relationship to the Confession since it was first adopted by the General Assembly of 1647. It also gives an account of events prior to and following the 1974 General Assembly.

For ease of reference, Appendix 1 sets out relevant texts while Appendix 2 shows these texts amended in the manner proposed by the Panel on Doctrine, approved by the General Assemblies of 1972 and 1973 and by over two-thirds of Presbyteries in two successive years, but failing to secure final approval in 1974. Appendix 3 contains the 1992 Statement of Faith.



The Westminster Confession in the Church of Scotland

The Westminster Confession of Faith was one of a series of documents drawn up by an ‘Assembly of Divines’ meeting at Westminster in the 1640s. Other documents produced by the same Assembly comprised

the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, The Form of Presbyterian Church Government, and a Directory for the Public Worship of God. The Confession was adopted by the General Assembly of 1647, the Assembly ‘judging it to be most orthodox and grounded upon the Word of God’.¹ At the same time the Assembly made clear that the references in the Confession to the authority of the civil magistrate to call a synod of ministers did not mean that church assemblies could not be called ‘by the intrinsical power received from Christ, as often as it is necessary for the good of the Church to assemble, in case the Magistrate, to the detriment of the Church, withhold or deny his consent’.² In light of subsequent history, it is interesting to note that at its very first adopting of the Confession the General Assembly felt the need to enter a ‘for the avoidance of doubt’ caveat.

The Westminster Assembly was a Parliamentary rather than a church initiative and its aims were as much political as ecclesiastical. Its desire to unite the Reformed churches within Great Britain under a Presbyterian polity was strongly opposed by Charles I. However, it was enthusiastically approved north of the border, with the Confession being ratified as an important constitutional document for the Reformed church in Scotland by an Act of the Scottish Parliament in 1649. The Confession was also one of the foundation documents of the 1690 constitutional settlement of Presbyterianism as the Kirk by Law Established and was subsequently incorporated in the legislation giving effect to the Act of Union with England. The 1690 Act Ratifying the Confession of Faith, and Settling the Presbyterian Church Government described the Confession as ‘the public and avowed Confession of this Church, containing the sum and substance of the Doctrine of the Reformed Churches’.³

However, in the intervening three centuries the church’s relationship with the Confession has been the occasion of regular controversy. Its theology stressed the sovereignty of God and the authority of Scripture and espoused the doctrine of double predestination. The *Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church USA* (1999) comments: ‘The Westminster Standards represent the fruits of a Protestant scholasticism that refined and systematized the teachings of the Reformation. The standards lift up the truth about the authority of the Scriptures, as immediately inspired in Hebrew and Greek, kept pure in all ages, and

known through the internal witness of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴ However, an Act of the General Assembly of 1711, which prescribed questions to be put to ministers at their ordination, introduced the question: ‘Do you sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine of the Confession of Faith [...] to be the truths of God, contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?’⁷⁵ This represented a significant shift from the 1690 view of the Confession as containing the sum and substance of the doctrine of the Reformed church and presented the Confession, not so much as lifting up the truth about the authority of Scripture, but as being itself the authority by which Scripture was itself to be judged. In this connection the Panel on Doctrine, in its report to the General Assembly of 1970, went so far as to observe:

The Westminster Confession implied that its interpretation of Scripture was the only legitimate one. Even though it pointed beyond itself to Scripture it was commonly assumed that what was contained in it was an accurate interpretation of the Scriptures, and that to preach and teach the doctrines of the Confession was the same thing as preaching and teaching the doctrines of Holy Scripture. This had the effect of causing Scripture to be interpreted according to the principles of the Westminster Confession. In practice the Westminster Confession tended to oust Scripture as the supreme standard of the Church.⁶

In light of this approach it was not surprising that the Confession became a focus of dispute, not least during the ‘new light’ controversies of the late eighteenth century and the debates surrounding the rise of biblical criticism in the nineteenth century. For example, the 1804 ‘revised testimony’ of the New Light Anti-Burghers (a faction of one of the eighteenth-century Secession churches) expressed it thus: ‘That, as no human composure, however excellent and well expressed, can be supposed to contain a full and comprehensive view of divine truth; so, by this adherence [to the Confession], we are not precluded from embracing, upon due deliberation, any further light which may afterward arise from the word of God about any article of divine truth.’⁷⁷ Seventy-five years later, in a Declaratory Act of

1879, the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church acknowledged that, ‘Whereas the formula in which the subordinate Standards of this Church are accepted requires assent to them as an exhibition of the sense in which the Scriptures are understood’ these Standards ‘being of human composition, are necessarily imperfect [...]’.⁸

An equivalent Declaratory Act of the Free Church General Assembly of 1892 made similar points and declared the sense in which it understood and interpreted both the Confession and the Scriptures, for example, with regard to the interpretation of the six days in the Mosaic account of creation and the doctrine of divine decrees, which was, in effect, repudiated. This doctrine had become increasingly problematic with the rise of nineteenth-century foreign missions and a growing awareness of the diversity of the world and its peoples beyond Scotland’s shores. Thus the 1879 United Presbyterian Act stated: ‘That the doctrine of divine decrees, including the doctrine of election to eternal life, is held in connection and harmony with the truth that God is not willing that any should perish [...]’⁹; and while asserting ‘that none are saved except through the mediation of Christ’ and reaffirming ‘the duty of sending the Gospel to the heathen’, the Act also acknowledged that ‘in accepting the Standards, it is not required to be held that [...] God may not extend His grace to any who are without the pale of ordinary means, as it may seem good in His sight.’¹⁰ In similar vein the 1892 Free Church Act made clear its view ‘That this Church does not teach, and does not regard the Confession as teaching, the fore-ordination of men to death irrespective of their own sin.’¹¹

Within the established church the issue of the Confession also occasioned debate where, interestingly, one of the issues was that elders, on their ordination, were required to indicate their assent to a document which they had never read. The committee to which the matter had been remitted reported to the 1888 General Assembly with a recommendation that the rather strict 1711 formula of adherence to the Confession be replaced by one reflecting the 1690 position. This invited a simple acknowledgement that the doctrine contained in the Confession was the true doctrine, whereas the 1711 formula had required assent ‘to the whole doctrine of the Confession [...] as the truths of God, contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New

Testaments'.¹² The 1889 Assembly, following the consent of a majority of Presbyteries under the Barrier Act, duly approved the revised, less strict formula of adherence to the Confession.

Things were by this time moving towards the re-union of Presbyterian Scotland and in 1900 the first major step was taken towards that goal in the coming together of the United Presbyterian Church with the vast majority of the Free Church to constitute the United Free Church. The 1879 and 1892 Declaratory Acts had indicated a large measure of doctrinal consensus between the two churches and the Uniting Act spoke warmly of 'a remarkable and happy agreement obtained between them' in regard to doctrine, government, discipline and worship and also 'with respect to the spirituality and freedom of the Church of Christ and her subjection to Him as her only Head, and to His Word as her supreme standard.'¹³ However, things were not so happy within the Free Church. In response to that church's Declaratory Act of 1892, a group, concerned by what they perceived to be a relaxation of standards, had seceded to form the Free Presbyterian Church. As a consequence, in 1894 an attempt at damage limitation was made through the passing of a further Act which declared that 'the statements of doctrine contained in the said [1892] Act are not thereby imposed upon any of the Church's office-bearers as part of the Standards of the Church; but that those who are licensed or ordained to office in this Church, in answering the questions and subscribing the Formula, are entitled to do so in view of the said Declaratory Act.'¹⁴ In other words, the adoption of a new understanding afforded by the 1892 Act was permitted but not required. In the same way, though on different grounds, a small group within the Free Church declined to enter the 1900 union. Their argument was that, by entering into a union with the voluntarist United Presbyterian Church, the majority of the Free Church was abandoning the establishment principle held dear by Thomas Chalmers as one of the original principles of the Free Church. Their argument was that the intention of the Disruption was not to forsake the principle of an established church but, rather, to leave a corrupt establishment with a view to returning to one that had been purified. The dissenters took their argument all the way to the House of Lords, won their case in 1904 and, in consequence, were awarded all the assets of the former Free Church.

The ensuing chaos required the setting up of a Parliamentary Commission under the Churches (Scotland) Act 1905, to effect an equitable sharing of finance and property. The United Free Church, alarmed by this turn of events, with its challenge to the church's spiritual freedom, passed an Act anent the Spiritual Independence of the Church (1906). This asserted the Church's right, under Christ 'to alter, change, add to or modify, her constitution and laws, Subordinate Standards and Church Formulas, and to determine and declare what these are.'¹⁵ The Church of Scotland, looking on from the side lines, was likewise alarmed. After all, union between itself and the new United Free Church was clearly the next logical step. Was such an enterprise similarly to become embroiled in years of legal argument? To address that question, the opportunity presented by the 1905 Churches (Scotland) Act was taken also to assert the power of the established church to alter its relationship to the Confession by means of varying the formula of adherence. So, in 1910 the Church of Scotland passed an Act replacing the 1889 Formula with one which required ministers to subscribe the Westminster Confession of Faith 'declaring that I accept it as the Confession of this Church, and that I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained therein.'¹⁶

In due course work began on union between the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church and the bringing into being of a church which was both national and free. The basis of this union was set out in a series of Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland in Matters Spiritual, ratified by both churches and then appended to the Church of Scotland Act 1921. Article 2 describes the Westminster Confession as 'The principal subordinate standard of the Church of Scotland [...] containing the sum and substance of the Faith of the Reformed Church.'¹⁷ Article 5 asserts the Church's freedom

to frame or adopt its subordinate standards, to declare the sense in which it understands its Confession of Faith, to modify the forms of expression therein, or to formulate other doctrinal statements [...] but always in agreement with the Word of God and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the said Confession, of which agreement the Church shall be

sole judge, and with due regard to liberty of opinion in points which do not enter into the substance of the Faith.¹⁸

While this substance of the Faith remained largely undefined, the first Article contained a doctrinal statement outlining the church's purpose and Article 8 required that any amendment to the Articles must be consistent with the provisions of the first Article, 'adherence to which, as interpreted by the Church, is essential to [the Church's] continuity and corporate life.'¹⁹

The union itself was given effect by a Uniting Act to which these Articles were appended, along with the Preamble, Questions and Formula, still read at services of ordination and induction. These reflected the position and status of the Confession as set out in the Articles Declaratory. Following the passing of the Uniting Act by both churches, the Westminster statute known as the Church of Scotland Act 1921 came into operation. The Articles Declaratory were included as a Schedule to this Act.



The 1968 General Assembly

The General Assembly of 1968, on the motion of Professor J. K. S. Reid, instructed the Panel on Doctrine 'to give consideration to the place of the Westminster Confession of Faith as the subordinate standard of the Church's faith and to the reference to it in the Preamble and Questions used at Ordinations, with a view to offering guidance to the Church.'²⁰ In seconding the motion Dr Nevile Davidson observed: 'A Confession of Faith which does not completely reflect the theological thinking and Christian conviction of the Church which professes it cannot be of the full use to the Church which it ought to be, and I think that is the position with the Westminster Confession at the moment.' Dr Davidson listed three purposes of a Confession of Faith: (1) to safeguard sound doctrine; (2) for the instruction of enquirers and new members; and (3) to serve as a declaration of what the Church believes. On all three counts, he maintained, the Westminster Confession failed the test.

The same General Assembly received an Overture from the Presbytery of Glasgow which approached the same issue, but from the

perspective of making the church's doctrinal position more accessible and understood. It should be recalled that these were the 'swinging sixties' when deference was dying, authority was being lampooned on programmes like *That Was the Week That Was* and Bishop John Robinson of Woolwich was writing his bestseller, *Honest to God*. Against this background people were naturally asking what the church believed and why was there no accessible and comprehensible statement that could be made generally available. As Dr Andrew Herron observed when speaking in support of the Glasgow Overture, it appeared that the church was unable to deal with heresy because it was unable to define orthodoxy. If earlier generations had had concerns that the church lacked freedom to think and grow because of a rigid relationship with the Confession, the concern now appeared to be that there was too much freedom and that this needed to be curtailed. The issues raised by the Overture were remitted to a Special Committee while, as noted previously, the Panel on Doctrine was handed the remit relating specifically to the Westminster Confession.

The Panel returned the following year with an interim report acknowledging that the situation was unsatisfactory. Thought had been given to drafting a new Confession but the Panel had doubted whether this would be wise 'in this period of Ecumenical change and theological ferment'.²¹ What the Panel did propose, however, was the abandoning of the concept of a subordinate standard and re-designating the Confession as an 'historic statement of the Church's abiding faith'²² alongside the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and the Scots Confession. The Panel argued that 'no confessional formula can be adequate for all time, as it is bound to be time-conditioned and to reflect the limitations and concerns of the age in which it was drafted.'²³ Indeed, the Panel observed more specifically that 'The fuller confessional statements of the post-Reformation era suffer still more markedly from the over-precision and unduly legalistic thinking of their day, which led the men who drafted them to be dogmatic about mysteries which are beyond the comprehension of finite and sinful creatures.'²⁴

Along with the suggestion of altering the status of the Confession, the Panel proposed that a list of fundamental doctrines of the faith be incorporated into the Preamble read at ordination services and

reflected in a revised set of questions to ordinands and ministers at services of induction. In addition, the Preamble would acknowledge that ‘no confessional statement can be final’.²⁵ The reference in the existing Preamble to liberty of opinion on points of doctrine which do not enter into the substance of the faith would disappear, as would the reference to the Confession as subordinate standard. The proposed list of fundamental doctrines was in the following terms:

We believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We believe in the Gospel of the sovereign grace and love of God, wherein through Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, incarnate, crucified, risen and glorified we are reconciled to Him and to one another, and summoned to receive, in repentance and faith, the forgiveness of sins, renewal by the Holy Spirit, and eternal life.

*We believe God calls us to work and pray for the advancement of His Kingdom throughout the world, and to look for the coming in glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge all men [sic] and bring in the fulfilment of His righteous purposes in eternity.*²⁶

These proposals were sent to Presbyteries for discussion and comment. Of 54 Presbyteries responding, 30 approved the concept of departing from a subordinate standard, 18 favoured the idea of a new Confession, and 36 were content with the statement of fundamental doctrines. At the same time the Panel warned:

All our formulations are made in light of Scripture but in such a way that they point beyond themselves to Jesus Christ. There is always the danger that we may identify our formulations of the truth with the Truth. We think it important, therefore, to distinguish between Confessions of the Faith and Definitions of the Faith; the latter we believe to be beyond human power adequately to frame.²⁷

However, it was becoming apparent that the issue was not just theological, but constitutional and legal. Mindful of the Free Church

case of 1900–04, questions were being asked as to whether the church had the power to act in the ways being proposed. However, the Procurator’s Opinion was quite clear that the church did have the authority to adjust its relationship to the Confession and the Assembly resolved to proceed on the basis of this advice. Presbyteries were asked to give further thought to the Panel’s proposals and the views of Kirk Sessions were also sought.

In 1971 the Panel reported that 46 Presbyteries and 1,146 Kirk Sessions were in favour of dropping the term ‘subordinate Standard’ with 12 Presbyteries and 259 Kirk Sessions against. Approval rating for the draft statement of fundamental doctrines was 43 to 13 amongst Presbyteries and 1,219 to 175 amongst Kirk Sessions. Consequential alterations to Articles 2 and 5 of the Articles Declaratory also found significant support – 41 to 16 and 1,098 to 245. The proposed change to Article 2 was to delete the first sentence and replace it with the following:

*The Church of Scotland acknowledges the Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed as Declarations of the faith of the Universal Church. It is guided by the Scots Confession and the Westminster Confession as historic statements of the faith of the Reformed Church.*²⁸

In Article 5 it was proposed to delete the references to ‘subordinate standards’ and ‘its Confession of Faith’ and refer simply to ‘confessions of faith’. The phrase ‘contained in the said Confession’ would also be removed. [See Appendix 2]

The Panel offered reassurance to those who were alarmed at the prospect of liberty of opinion no longer being available. It stated that it understood such liberty to relate only to the Confession, arguing that the wording of Article 5 implied this. However, in view of concerns raised, the Panel now recommended the retention of the reference to liberty of opinion in its revised Article 5. At the same time, it counselled against the abuse of such liberty and was quite clear that it did not apply to those matters which are of ‘the substance of the faith’.²⁹ There could be no question of Scripture or doctrinal statements being subordinate to the private judgement of the individual. [See Appendix 2]

Again, the report was sent to Presbyteries for ‘comment and criticism’ and the Panel was instructed to prepare an Overture on the new Preamble, Questions and Formula, and the amendments to Articles 2 and 5 of the Articles Declaratory for presentation to the General Assembly of 1972. In terms of the provisions for amending the Articles Declaratory, such an Overture would require the approval of three successive General Assemblies and the consent of two-thirds of Presbyteries in the intervening two successive years. The Overture, incorporating further amendments in light of Presbytery ‘comment and criticism’, was duly brought to the 1972 Assembly where it was adopted and sent to Presbyteries. In 1973 the Committee on Classifying Returns to Overtures reported that 43 Presbyteries (more than the required two-thirds) approved, with 18 disapproving. The Overture was sent down again and came back to the 1974 Assembly with the approval of 49 Presbyteries, with 12 disapproving. The scene was therefore set for the General Assembly of that year to bring the process to completion by implementing the changes that had been worked on so extensively over the previous six years.

At this point it is relevant to recall that, while the 1968 Assembly had remitted the question of the Westminster Confession to the Panel, it had also remitted to a special committee the questions raised by the Glasgow Overture of that year concerning an accessible statement of faith. That Committee had brought a report to the General Assembly of 1969 with the recommendation that the Panel on Doctrine should be given the task of formulating from the revised Preamble, once approved, ‘a simple statement of belief for popular use’.³⁰ In its 1972 report, the Panel noted the implication that the preparation of such a statement could not be taken forward until the decision of the church on the amended Preamble was known. It now sought authority to proceed on the basis of the proposed new Preamble. The following year it reported that regional working parties had been established and begun their work, and in 1974 it reported that work was continuing. In other words, at the point when the Assembly had finally to make up its mind on the status of the Westminster Confession work on a new statement was not yet complete.

This perhaps helps explain the Assembly’s final vote that year when a counter-motion to the Overture prevailed by 292 votes to 238.

The counter-motion read: ‘The General Assembly do not amend the Articles Declaratory and the Preamble, Questions and Formula as set out in Appendix IV and resolve to depart from the matter until a new Statement of Faith is accepted by the General Assembly.’³¹ For the sake of completeness, it can be noted that the phrase ‘until a new Statement of Faith is accepted by the General Assembly’ was an amendment replacing the word ‘completely’ in an original counter-motion to depart from the matter completely. That would have slammed the door shut. The successful amendment at least left the door slightly ajar, though my memory of being in the Assembly that evening was that such a thought brought little comfort to the 238 commissioners who had voted for the changes which had so engaged the mind of the church. Notwithstanding the failure of the main proposal, the Assembly remitted to the Business Committee, in consultation with the Panel on Doctrine, to draft a new remit to the Panel on the preparation of a new Statement of Faith. It is perhaps also worth noting the arithmetic which indicates that less than half of commissioners to the 1974 General Assembly took part in the final vote.

Putting a brave face on things the Panel reported in 1975 that

Although the Assembly did not accept the Panel’s proposals, it likewise did not reject them, and the Panel is of the opinion that this long exercise has not been entirely unprofitable. In particular, the detailed replies from Presbyteries in two successive years give a valuable insight into the mind of the Church and indicate beyond all doubt that the Westminster Confession of Faith does not accurately reflect the faith of the contemporary Church [...]³²

Meantime the Panel reported that it was continuing its work on the new Statement of Belief and hoped to bring something to the following year’s Assembly. This it duly did and the Assembly of 1976 sent the Statement, running to ten pages of the ‘Blue Book’, to Presbyteries for comment. In 1977 the Panel reported that it was still considering these comments and hoped to report more fully the following year. In 1978, with frustration barely disguised, the Panel reported that ‘two

conclusions emerge from comments offered by Presbyteries:– (i) that in its present form the statement of belief does not commend itself to the Church as a whole; but (ii) that the presbyterial comments do not provide any clear, unambiguous and commanding indication of the lines along which a revision might profitably be attempted.⁷³³ As a consequence, the Panel proposed to take no further steps in the matter until the mind of the church was made clear in relation to the Articles Declaratory, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Preamble and Questions used at ordinations.

The 1978 Assembly agreed to release the Panel from the remit to produce a Statement of Belief for popular use but, at the same time, drew the church's attention to the first of the Articles Declaratory 'as an authoritative guide in any statement of Christian belief'.³⁴ In addition, the Assembly resolved by 252 votes to 223 'anew to remit to the Panel to consider the status of the Westminster Confession of Faith as the Church's subordinate standard, and report to a future General Assembly with, if so advised, new proposals anent the definition of the Church's doctrinal standards.'³⁵ These voting figures did not indicate an overwhelming enthusiasm to revisit the debates of the previous ten years and the Panel proceeded cautiously. In 1982 it announced the publication of a book of essays, *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*,³⁶ and commended this as a basis for study and reflection. Two years later the Panel came back with specific recommendations for amendment of the Articles Declaratory. Again these focussed on Articles 2 and 5. It was proposed that the opening sentence of Article 2 should be replaced with the following:

The principal subordinate standards of the Church of Scotland are the Nicene Creed, proclaiming the trinitarian and incarnational faith of the whole Catholic Church, the Apostles' Creed, declaring her baptismal faith, and the Scots Confession and the Westminster Confession, containing the fundamental doctrines of the faith of the Reformed Church.³⁷

In Article 5 the phrase 'its Confession of Faith' would be replaced simply by the pronoun 'them' referring back to 'subordinate standards' and the references to liberty of opinion would be qualified by reference

to the first of the Declaratory Articles. After the phrase ‘in agreement with the Word of God’ the revised text would read:

[...] and with the provisions of the first Article hereof, of which agreement the Church shall be sole judge, and with due regard to liberty of opinion in points of doctrine other than those affirmed and avowed in the first Article hereof, provided always that the exercise of such liberty of opinion is consistent with the pure preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments according to Christ’s ordinance, and discipline rightly exercised.³⁸

Consequential amendments reflecting these changes were also offered to the Preamble, Questions and Formula. The proposal to send these changes to Presbyteries as an Overture under the provisions for amending the Articles Declaratory survived both an attempted amendment and a counter-motion to depart from the matter. However, when the matter came back the following year the General Assembly learned that, far from gaining the necessary two-thirds majority, the Overture had failed to secure even a simple majority, being disapproved by 27 presbyteries to 21 in favour.

In 1986 the Panel returned to the question of a Statement of Faith, seeking and obtaining an instruction to prepare a draft. As before, this was taken forward as a consultative exercise involving Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions. Finally, in 1992 a Statement was authorised by the General Assembly for publication and for use in worship and teaching. The text is printed inside the back cover of Common Order 1994 and included as Appendix 3 to this paper. Coincidentally, the General Assembly of 1986, which instructed the Panel to prepare a new Statement of Faith, passed an Act dissociating the church from the more extreme language used by the Confession in some sections to describe the Pope, the Mass and the Roman Catholic church generally. The initiative for this latest Declaratory Act on the Confession came by way of a petition from an elder concerned that certain ‘clauses contained in the Principal Subordinate Standard of the Church of Scotland (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1647) are offensive to Christians in this modern age.’



Unfinished business

The foregoing account gives some indication of the Church of Scotland's rather turbulent relationship with the Westminster Confession and shows how close the late twentieth-century church came to adjusting that relationship from 'principal subordinate standard' to 'historic statement of the faith of the Reformed Church', ranking it alongside the Scots Confession of 1560 and the ancient Creeds. Over the six-year period from 1968 to 1974 a clear consensus for change emerged following the most extensive consultation, only to fall at the final hurdle. It is also important to recall that the decision of the 1974 General Assembly was not to depart from the matter 'completely', but 'to depart from the matter until a new Statement of Faith was accepted by the General Assembly.' Arguably, such a Statement of Faith was accepted by the General Assembly of 1992. Does it not therefore follow that the church should then have proceeded to conclude the matter?

I say 'arguably' because it was never clear what kind of Statement of Faith the church was looking for. Was it something equivalent to the Confession of Faith, namely, a substantial text prepared by the best scholarly and theological minds in the church? Was it something simpler, designed more for popular use, which could be used in worship and as a teaching tool? With regard to the former, the view of the Panel in its 1969 report was that this was not the time to be attempting such a task. (Interestingly, the same point was made over a century ago with regard to the discussions surrounding the reunion of the Church of Scotland.) With regard to the latter, the 1992 Statement of Faith (see Appendix 3) is available to the church, though I am unable to comment on the extent to which it is used in worship and instruction. I do know, however, that were I to be asked by an enquirer for a statement of the church's belief I would be more inclined to offer a copy of that Statement than the Westminster Confession.

As noted, the Panel had brought a fuller Statement of Belief for popular use to the General Assembly of 1976. It ran to ten pages of that year's 'Blue Book' reports but, as we have noted, did not particularly commend itself to the church. Perhaps it fell between the two stools of exhaustive theological text and short, accessible statement. The Panel

had also, in response to its 1968 remit, prepared brief statements of fundamental doctrines to be incorporated into the Preamble. These enjoyed a strong level of acceptance by the church in the 1972–74 consultation process but fell when the whole scheme collapsed in 1974.

Reference has also been made to the first of the Articles Declaratory which undoubtedly proclaims a series of core beliefs, though without claiming these to be exhaustive. The Article concludes with a reference to ‘the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as its supreme rule of faith and life, and avows the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic faith founded thereupon.’ Nowhere are these fundamental doctrines listed in a full and final way. Then again, that may be neither possible nor desirable. After all, is that not the very thing the Westminster Confession sought to do and which has been the cause of so much controversy?

In essence, this question of fundamental doctrines is something which goes to the heart of the church’s problems with the Confession. In its 1970 Report, the Panel on Doctrine expressed the position thus: ‘[...] although the Westminster Confession is the chief subordinate standard of the Church, the terms in which Ministers and other office-bearers subscribe to it are so ill-defined that it is not easy to give them any precise meaning.’³⁹ The Report goes on to note how increasing dissatisfaction with doctrines such as predestination and election obliged the church to loosen the terms of subscription to the Confession. However,

The device which the Church adopted was neither to revise nor to rewrite, but to retain the Confession, while giving its Ministers and office-bearers “liberty of opinion in points which do not enter into the substance of the Faith.” [...] The weakness of this position is that the Church has not specifically defined what it understands to be of “the substance of the Faith,” and, therefore, men [*sic*] at times claim that this liberty of opinion entitles them to reject doctrines which others regard as of the substance of the Faith.⁴⁰

It is evident that the difficulties and frustrations with the Confession

as Principal Subordinate Standard, which led to the 1974 proposals, remain. These include the following:

- The Confession is a product of its day and reflects political concerns, ecclesiastical issues and a theological style very different from that of today.
- Over the centuries (indeed right from the start) the church has felt the need to qualify its adherence to the Confession, most recently in 1986, with regard to what we would now consider abusive and unacceptable language in relation to another Christian tradition.
- The text is effectively inaccessible and, if the complaint was being made in the 1880s that elders were required to subscribe it without ever reading it, how much truer is that today?
- The emphasis on the Confession as subordinate standard, hedged about with qualifications and liberty of opinion with regard to an ill-defined substance of the faith, can create an impression of the church not entirely clear as to its core beliefs.



Conclusion

Where does the church go from here? A brief, but unsuccessful attempt was made to persuade the General Assembly of 2010 to re-visit this whole matter. That was my final Assembly as Principal Clerk and I could not resist offering the comment that this very matter had featured in my first General Assembly as a commissioner, the Assembly of 1972 with Ronald Selby Wright in the chair. As I prepared to retire I had a distinct sense of ‘this is where I came in’.

Certainly I am of the view that this is a nettle which needs to be grasped. We can do it the hard way and go through the whole process again, over the next decade or so. Alternatively, we might take the easier route of deeming the succinct, almost credal, statement of 1992 as sufficient to meet the 1974 requirement for concluding the matter, namely the drafting of a new Confession. Alternatively (or alongside that), we might revisit the considerable work done by the Panel on Doctrine in formulating new statements of faith and amending the Articles Declaratory in 1970, 1975–78 and 1985–86

referred to in this paper. Perhaps then we could proceed to locate the Westminster Confession in an honoured place alongside the other historic statements of the faith and depart, finally, from the concept of a subordinate standard.

Notes

- ¹ Act approving the Confession of Faith. Assembly at Edinburgh, August 27, 1647. Sess. 23.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Act 7th June 1690. Ratifying the Confession of Faith, and settling Presbyterian Church Government.
- ⁴ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Ky.: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 118f.
- ⁵ *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1638–1842: reprinted from the original edition, under the superintendence of the Church Law Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing and Publishing Company, 1843), 454.
- ⁶ *Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland with the Legislative Acts 1970* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1970), 174. (Reports to the General Assembly are hereafter cited as *Reports*, [year].)
- ⁷ *Narrative and Testimony, Enacted by the General Associate Synod, 1804*, 10 [quoted in John M'Kerrow, *History of the Secession Church* (Glasgow: A. Fullerton, 1841), 443].
- ⁸ Declaratory Act (1879) of the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland [reprinted in John Stewart Templeton, *A Layman's Mind on Creed and Church* (London: MacMillan, 1906), 222].
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 223.
- ¹¹ Declaratory Act (1892) of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland Anent the Confession of Faith [reprinted in Ibid., 224].
- ¹² See n. 5.
- ¹³ Uniting Act (1900). In *Manual of Practice and Procedure in the*

- United Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Offices of the United Free Church, 1905), 111.
- ¹⁴ Act (1894) anent Declaratory Act 1892 on Confession of Faith. In *ibid.*, 181.
- ¹⁵ Act anent Spiritual Independence of the Church, 1906. In Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom, Volume III. The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1977), 944.
- ¹⁶ Act III, On the Formula. *Reports on the Schemes of the Church of Scotland 1910* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1910), xviii.
- ¹⁷ Church of Scotland Act 1921, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/11-12/29/enacted>
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Reports*, 1968, 173f.
- ²¹ *Reports*, 1969, 210.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 210f.
- ²⁷ *Reports*, 1970, 175.
- ²⁸ *Reports*, 1971, 709.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 708.
- ³⁰ *Reports*, 1969, 790.
- ³¹ *Reports*, 1974, Deliverances section, 45.
- ³² *Reports*, 1975, 148.
- ³³ *Reports*, 1978, 155.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, Deliverances section, 18.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Alasdair I. C. Heron, ed., *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today: Papers Prepared for the Church of Scotland Panel on Doctrine* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1982).
- ³⁷ *Reports*, 1984, 187f.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 188
- ³⁹ *Reports*, 1970, 171.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

APPENDIX 1

Excerpts from Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland in Matters Spiritual

1. The Church of Scotland is part of the Holy Catholic or Universal Church; worshipping one God, Almighty, all-wise, and all-loving, in the Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; adoring the Father, infinite in Majesty, of whom are all things; confessing our Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son, made very man for our salvation; glorying in His Cross and Resurrection, and owning obedience to Him as the Head over all things to His Church; trusting in the promised renewal and guidance of the Holy Spirit; proclaiming the forgiveness of sins and acceptance with God through faith in Christ, and the gift of Eternal Life; and labouring for the advancement of the Kingdom of God throughout the world. The Church of Scotland adheres to the Scottish Reformation; receives the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as its supreme rule of faith and life; and avows the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic faith founded thereupon.

2. The principal subordinate standard of the Church of Scotland is the Westminster Confession of Faith approved by the General Assembly of 1647, containing the sum and substance of the Faith of the Reformed Church. Its government is Presbyterian, and is exercised through Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries, [Provincial Synods deleted by Act V, 1992], and General Assemblies. Its system and principles of worship, orders, and discipline are in accordance with “The Directory for the Public Worship of God”, “The Form of Presbyterial Church Government” and “The Form of Process”, as these have been or may hereafter be interpreted or modified by Acts of the General Assembly or by consuetude.

5. This Church has the inherent right, free from interference by civil authority, but under the safeguards for deliberate action and legislation

provided by the Church itself, to frame or adopt its subordinate standards, to declare the sense in which it understands its Confession of Faith, to modify the forms of expression therein, or to formulate other doctrinal statements, and to define the relation thereto of its office-bearers and members, but always in agreement with the Word of God and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the said Confession, of which agreement the Church shall be sole judge, and with due regard to liberty of opinion in points which do not enter into the substance of the Faith.

Preamble, Questions, and Formula

Preamble

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King and Head of the Church, who, being ascended on high, has given gifts to God's people for the edifying of the body of Christ, we are met here as a Presbytery to ordain A. B. to the office of the Holy Ministry by prayer and the laying on of hands by the Presbyters to whom it belongs, and to induct him/her into the pastoral charge of

In this act of ordination the Church of Scotland, as part of the Holy Catholic or Universal Church worshipping One God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – affirms anew its belief in the Gospel of the sovereign grace and love of God, wherein through Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen, He freely offers to all people, upon repentance and faith, the forgiveness of sins, renewal by the Holy Spirit, and eternal life, and calls them to labour in the fellowship of faith for the advancement of the Kingdom of God throughout the world.

The Church of Scotland acknowledges the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the supreme rule of faith and life.

The Church of Scotland holds as its subordinate standard the Westminster Confession of Faith, recognising liberty of opinion on

such points of doctrine as do not enter into the substance of the Faith, and claiming the right, in dependence on the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, to formulate, interpret, or modify its subordinate standards: always in agreement with the Word of God and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the said Confession – of which agreement the Church itself shall be sole judge.

Questions to be put to Minister about to be ordained/inducted

1. Do you believe in one God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and do you confess anew the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord?
2. Do you believe the Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to be the supreme rule of faith and life?
3. Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church?
4. Do you acknowledge the Presbyterian Government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God; and do you promise to be subject in the Lord to this Presbytery and to the superior Courts of the Church, and to take your due part in the administration of its affairs?
5. Do you promise to seek the unity and peace of this Church; to uphold the doctrine, worship, government, and discipline thereof; and to cherish a spirit of love towards all your brothers and sisters in Christ?
6. Are not zeal for the glory of God, love to the Lord Jesus Christ, and a desire for the salvation of all people, so far as you know your own heart, your great motives and chief inducements to enter into the office of the Holy Ministry?
7. Do you engage in the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ to live a godly and circumspect life; and faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully

to discharge the duties of your ministry, seeking in all things the advancement of the Kingdom of God?

8. Do you accept and close with the call to be Pastor of this charge, and promise through grace to study to approve yourself a faithful Minister of the Gospel among this people?

Question to the congregation at an Induction

Do you, the members and adherents of this Congregation, in receiving A. B., whom you have called to be your Minister, promise her/him all due honour and support in the Lord; and in view of the pastoral and missionary obligations of this congregation, do you each now agree to share with your Minister the responsibility for Christian witness and Christian service; and will you give of your means, as the Lord shall prosper you, for the maintenance of the Christian Ministry and the furtherance of the Gospel?

Question to Elders on Ordination and Admission

Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith; do you promise to seek the unity and peace of this Church; to uphold its doctrine, worship, government and discipline; and to take your due part in the administration of its affairs?

The Formula which is signed by Ministers, Elders, Deacons and Readers

I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church.

I acknowledge the Presbyterian government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God, and promise that I will submit thereto and concur therewith.

I promise to observe the order of worship and the administration of all public ordinances as the same are or may be allowed in this Church.

APPENDIX 2

Proposed 1974 Amendment of the Articles Declaratory

[New text underlined]

2. The Church of Scotland acknowledges the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed as Declarations of the faith of the Universal Church. It is guided by the Scots Confession and the Westminster Confession as historic statements of the faith of the Reformed Church. Its government is Presbyterian, and is exercised through Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries, [Provincial Synods deleted by Act V, 1992], and General Assemblies. Its system and principles of worship, orders, and discipline are in accordance with “The Directory for the Public Worship of God”, “The Form of Presbyterial Church Government” and “The Form of Process”, as these have been or may hereafter be interpreted or modified by Acts of the General Assembly or by consuetude.

5. This Church has the inherent right, free from interference by civil authority, but under the safeguards for deliberate action and legislation provided by the Church itself, to frame or adopt its confessions of faith, to declare the sense in which it understands them, to modify or add to the forms of expression therein, or to formulate other doctrinal statements, and to define the relation thereto of its officebearers and members, but always in agreement with the Word of God and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the said Confession, of which agreement the Church shall be sole judge, and with due regard to liberty of opinion in points which do not enter into the substance of the Faith.

Proposed 1974 Amendment of the Preamble

[New text underlined]

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King and Head of the Church, who, being ascended on high, has given gifts to God's people for the edifying of the body of Christ, we are met here as a Presbytery to ordain A. B. to the office of the Holy Ministry by prayer and the laying

on of hands by the Presbyters to whom it belongs, and to induct him/her into the pastoral charge of

In this act of ordination the Church of Scotland, as part of the Holy Catholic or Universal Church worshipping One God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It stands in the tradition of the Reformation and receives the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the authoritative witness to the revelation of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is Himself the Word of God and the sovereign Lord of faith and life.

The Church of Scotland acknowledges the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed as declarations of faith of the Universal Church. It is guided by the Scots Confession and the Westminster Confession as historic statements of the faith of the Reformed Church. The Church of Scotland, aware that no confessional statement can be final, affirms its freedom and responsibility, in dependence on the Holy Spirit, in the light of Holy Scripture and within the fellowship of the whole Church of God, to formulate such confessions as may from time to time be required, recognising liberty of opinion in points of doctrine which do not enter into the substance of the faith.

In this act of ordination the Church of Scotland affirms these fundamental doctrines to be of the substance of the faith which we confess when we say:

We believe in one God – Father Son and Holy Spirit – Maker of all things visible and invisible.

We believe in the Gospel of the sovereign grace and love of God, wherein through Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, incarnate, crucified, dead and buried, risen and glorified, we are reconciled to God, and to one another, and summoned to receive, in repentance and faith, the forgiveness of sins, renewal by the Holy Spirit and eternal life.

We believe that Jesus Christ, as Prophet, Priest and King, calls us to share with Him by work and prayer in His continuing ministry in the

world, whereby through the Holy Spirit, he builds up His Church by Word and Sacraments, ministers to the needs of men [sic] and calls them into His eternal kingdom.

We believe in the consummation of the Kingdom of God, when Jesus Christ, the Lord of history, will judge all men [sic] in righteousness and love, and bring to fulfilment God's eternal purpose for all creation.

1. Do you believe in one God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and do you confess anew the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord?
2. Do you believe the Word of God, given and heard in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to be the supreme rule of faith and life?
3. Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith as affirmed by this Church?

Other questions as at present for ministers and elders, respectively

Proposed Formula

I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith affirmed in the Preamble [... and so on as at present].

APPENDIX 3

A Statement of Christian Faith, Authorised for Use in Worship and Teaching, by the General Assembly of 1992

We believe in one God:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
God is love.

We praise God the Father:

who created the universe and keeps it in being.
He has made us his sons and daughters
to share his joy,
living together in justice and peace,
caring for his world and for each other.

We proclaim Jesus Christ, God the Son:

born of Mary,
by the power of the Holy Spirit;
he became one of us,
sharing our life and death.
He made known God's compassion and mercy
giving hope and declaring forgiveness of sin,
offering healing and wholeness to all.
By his death on the cross and by his resurrection
He has triumphed over evil.
Jesus is Lord of life and of all creation.

We trust God the Holy Spirit:

who unites us to Christ
and gives life to the Church;
who brings us to repentance and assures us of forgiveness.
The Spirit guides us
in our understanding of the Bible,
renews us in the sacraments
and calls us to serve God in the world.

We rejoice in the gift of eternal life:
we have sure and certain hope of
resurrection through Christ,
and we look for his coming again
to judge the world.
Then all things will be made new
and creation will rejoice
in worshipping the Father,
through the Son,
in the power of the Spirit,
one God, blessed for ever.

Amen.