



A new version of the Scots Confession, 1560

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Introduction

In connection with the 450th anniversary of the inception of the public Reformation in Scotland in 1560, some events have taken place. Such occasions tend to be confined to musings on the ‘defining event’ or the iconic personalities, seen through the prism of centuries later. It is less easy to let the voices of the original participants be heard in a way comprehensible to modern ears. For that, one needs to dip into the Kirk’s theological attic, as it were, and bring out some of the original deeds and charters with which the founding fathers justified their beliefs, actions and policies. In 1560, the infant, reformed Church of Scotland was constituted by a trinity of documents on doctrine, church order and ministry, and liturgy – the Confession of Faith, the *First Book of Discipline*, and the *Book of Common Order*. These are the foundational documents of the Scottish Reformation as it took shape ecclesiastically. Particularly determinative was the Confession, as it was enshrined in an Act of Parliament (1560, not legitimized until 1567), becoming part of the Scottish constitution that envisaged a new, exclusively Protestant nation. This document will be zoomed in on here, in full, but in an updated linguistic adaptation.

The Scottish reforming pioneers as part of a wider European movement must have fashioned something of value and durability, since their legacy still survives in one form or other. It was famously brought back to life by the Confessing Christians in the German Church struggle in the Nazi era.¹ Some, however, might quickly point out that several features of the subsequent and modern Church (and Christianity) would be alien and even obnoxious to those Scots, whose ideas were avant-garde in their time. A response to this is that

careful reading of their official corporate writings of 1560 reveals that they were not *collectively* so absolutist, rigid, doctrinaire, or ‘firm’ on everything as some people imagine. This applies particularly to biblical interpretation, forms of worship, church government, pastoral discipline, forms of ministry, and sensitive doctrinal areas such as predestination. While the Reformers were in no doubt that they stood in an Age of Enlightenment (perceived as divine rather than human), they were also aware that the Word of God in Scripture did not contain categorically prescriptive imperatives on all facets of doctrine and praxis. When the gradations of biblical authority faded out, human speculation, ingenuity and experiment took over. It followed that it was essential to the self-understanding everywhere of Reformed doctrinal statements and practical schemes that being fallibly human compositions, their status was only ad hoc, provisional and interim. They were not an object of faith and had no equivalence to the divine authority and holy status of Scripture as legitimately interpreted, despite the tendencies of captious traditionalists at various points to seem to claim otherwise. Such subordinate standards could therefore be changed, supplemented, modified or replaced, as happened in the end.

Even if many people pragmatically or prudentially subscribed to what was laid before them, neither the Scottish Reformers nor their successors were inclined to confessional idolatry or exclusivism, resisting (mostly) the temptation to equate their words with the speech of God. Indeed, they also disseminated the Confession of the English Church in Geneva, which (but not the Scots Confession) was published in the *Book of Common Order*. And in 1566, the General Assembly formally commended and recommended the Swiss Second Helvetic Confession, which had high status in the Reformed world. From the mid-1570s onwards, the confessional document studied as part of the divinity curriculum in the Scottish universities was the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), embodying a middle-of-the-road Calvinism. In 1581, a ‘Short and General Confession’, known as the King’s Confession or Negative Confession, was authorized as a sharp anti-Catholic supplement to the Scots Confession – at a time of heightening fears of Catholic restoration at large. In 1616, the largely pro-episcopalian General Assembly at Aberdeen adopted

a confessional statement providing for what was not explicit in the Scots Confession – a doctrine of double predestination by prior, eternal, divine decree. And lastly, in the course of the seventeenth century (1647–90), the Westminster Confession was adopted by the eventually victorious presbyterian Church of Scotland. The old Scots Confession was not abrogated – it simply fell into desuetude, as it was de facto redundant for much of that century anyway, due to problems and issues it was neither expansive nor prescriptive about. This was why on balance, Episcopalians stood by it more than dogmatic Presbyterians did.

The historical importance of the Scots Confession lies in its formative and normative influence for broadly Reformed or Protestant theology in Scotland. It provided the launching pad in national vernacular idiom for basic Reformation beliefs that became dominant and endured, at least formally. Its significance is such that one could venture to place it among the 100 objects that have helped shape Scottish history. However, in its original language, its value is mostly that of curiosity, of interest now mainly to a few scholars. This is to say, it is locked in a language that is no longer accessible to most people. This is frequently referred to as the ‘original Scots’. That is not even half true. For it is better described as Scots English or Anglo-Scots. It reflects a transitional stage in Scottish official documents from Scots to early modern English. To the untrained eye the Confession does look very ‘Scots’ indeed. However, there are few uniquely Scots features in the areas of vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. Scots characteristics are chiefly spelling, and a few words like ‘kirk’. To be borne in mind also is that the Confession is saturated with Scripture language, and that its terms, phrases and quotations are chiefly derived from the English Geneva Bible (1557–60). John Knox, one of the Confession’s committee of six authors, had also been involved in that.



Background to the version of the Confession below

In 1960 (the quatercentenary of the Scottish Reformation), the one and only version of the Scots Confession in any form of modern English usage from c.1600 onwards was published by James Bulloch

in a ‘Documents of the Church of Scotland’ series.² One perspective in this respect is that between 1847 and 2005, there have been four different German translations of the Confession, including one by Karl Barth. It is true that in his edition of *John Knox’s History of the Reformation in Scotland* (1949) W. C. Dickinson had provided a modernized text of the Confession, but this was strictly confined to spellings and punctuation. Bulloch goes further, as he often updates things by changing obsolescent vocabulary and some expressions, as intended. His version accompanied the re-issue of an original text published by G. D. Henderson in 1937 with a helpful introduction. The text of Henderson’s edition belongs to that of the official, Scottish parliamentary tradition – in his case, from the enhanced, anglicized printings and reprints from 1597 onwards.

Bulloch’s adaptation has also been the one availed of in subsequent, widely-known confession collections, so that dissemination is wide.³ His version has been very serviceable. It continues to fill a gap for modern general users without the time, inclination or wherewithal to wade through the antiquated original language of the Confession. Before Henderson’s text, there were since the nineteenth century several published versions of the original text versions available, such as by Edward Irving, the David Calderwood edition, David Laing’s edition of Knox’s works, Philip Schaff’s editions of creeds and confessions, new editions of the Acts of the Scottish Parliaments,⁴ as well as a Continental edition by E. F. K. Müller.⁵

The justification for attempting to update the received modern version is of various kinds. First, as it states in the book, Bulloch produced it ‘at very short notice’⁶ – just as the original was composed at even shorter notice (three days) and then edited further by a parliamentary sub-committee. Therefore Bulloch’s version, too, shows signs of hasty composition. Occasionally, words are missed out, or mistranslated (e.g. ‘cleansing’ for ‘purgatioun’ instead of exoneration or acquittal). Secondly, Bulloch’s approach to putting the Confession into a modern English is very conservative. Here and there he has produced some very good turns of phrase and made effective word-choices – but the overall impression is still of a rather old-fashioned, solemn, and unreconstructed English. This is partly due to the omnipresent vein of biblical language and jargon throughout.

Bulloch leaves that untouched, so that the expressions of the Geneva Bible and jargon of sixteenth-century theology still prevail. The longer this lasts, the more the Confession will recede from readability and comprehensibility. Paradoxically, at that time the language of the Confession was very contemporary and innovative, since the very idea of writing theology in the vernacular was a revolutionary one.

Thirdly, the Henderson text from which Bulloch worked was not a text-critical edition, although these in some measure already existed, such as the basic one by Laing,⁷ and the very useful modern one by the German scholar, Theodor Hesse.⁸ Accompanying Hesse's edition of the very first printing of the Confession by John Scott in 1561 is the interesting and helpful Latin translation by Patrick Adamson (St Andrews, 1572) – a near-contemporary interpreter. This, the existence of other vernacular, slightly divergent editions by various Scottish and English publishers in 1561, the survival of a few contemporary manuscript copies (but not the 'original'), and then the official parliamentary versions from 1567 onwards, mean that from the very beginning there has been textual inconsistency and variations.⁹ This is mostly in spelling, but sometimes vocabulary, and occasionally grammar and syntax that have a bearing on the meaning and even theological understanding. The influential Henderson/Bulloch texts take no account of all this. For some people this may be inconsequential; for others, interpretation of meaning relates to what precisely was said, as far as can be established.



The new version

The version below (from the 1568 parliamentary text printed by Robert Lekpreuik) will take these predominantly minor variants into account, and will tacitly adopt the one that seems most plausible. There are three or four substantive matters where the textual reading is problematical as regards its meaning.¹⁰ Proper biblical quotations are highlighted by italics, and are from the NRSV Bible. Round brackets in the text exist in the originals. Square brackets indicate a word or phrase inserted by me to help immediate comprehension. Without going for a fully 'free' adaptation, I have widely employed modern idiomatic English and vocabulary, while in some special cases using an old and a new word

alternately. There has been no attempt to airbrush out or mitigate the confrontational and intermittent ‘strong language’, unique to the Scots Confession among those in Europe. One must also recall that this was the version adopted after some of its language had already been toned down at the insistence of the Government, and that some of it derives from the Bible. Also, there is little one can do about its repetitiveness and prolixity at some points. The overall rendering here is purely personal. Paragraphs have been made within some articles to assist readability. The profoundly Latin structure of the syntax and word order in many sentences has been modified. Some very long sentences have been broken up into shorter ones, or modified with the use of a parenthetical dash (–). I have made concessions to inclusive language. A more definitive version would require a panel comprising of a classical and a modern linguist, a biblical scholar, a historian, and a theologian. This means that just like the content and original language of the Confession, the linguistic version offered here is provisional and experimental. The chief aim is to facilitate the reading of the text by younger generations who inhabit different language and theology worlds. It also has in mind those of little or no theological formation to facilitate access to something that is on all counts definitely remote; yet they may feel it is important to know about if the early modern Scottish past, its religion and culture (and continuing resonances) is to be less remotely understood. It might also help traditional and modern theologians and others to revisit the statement and reassess either some of their own preconceptions about it, or the ideas driving religious revolution and rediscovery as expressed by its life-threatened ‘shakers’.

Notes

- 1 For the full dogmatic interpretation of the Confession, see Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation* [Aberdeen Gifford Lectures on the Scots Confession] (trans. James L. M. Haire and Ian Henderson; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938). See also Ernst Wolff, “Das

- Problem des Widerstandsrechts bei Calvin”, in *Widerstandsrecht und Grenzen der Staatsgewalt* (ed. Bernhard Pfister and Gerhard Hildmann; Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1956), 54–55 [Scots Confession and resistance to tyranny].
- ² *The Scots Confession 1560 edited with an introduction by [...] George D. Henderson together with a rendering into modern English by [...] James Bulloch* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1960).
- ³ *Reformed Confessions of the 16th century, edited with historical introductions* by Arthur C. Cochrane (London: SCM Press, 1966). Re-issued with new introduction by Jack Rogers (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 2 (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2003).
- ⁴ Henderson & Bulloch, *The Scots Confession*, 7 f.
- ⁵ *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche: in authentischen Texten mit geschichtlicher Einleitung und Register* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1903).
- ⁶ Henderson & Bulloch, *The Scots Confession*, 8.
- ⁷ David Laing, ed., *The Works of John Knox*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1848).
- ⁸ In Wilhelm Niesel, ed., *Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1938), 79–118. Re-issued, Zürich: Theologische Buchhandlung, 1985.
- ⁹ For the recent, full text-critical edition of the Confession (1568 parliamentary text), see Ian Hazlett, “Confessio Scotica, 1560”, in *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften* (gen. eds. Andreas Mühlung and Peter Opitz; vol. 2/1, 1559–1563; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2009), 209–300. See Bibliography there for all related old and modern sources and literature. Cf. id., “The Scots Confession 1560: Context, Complexion and Critique”, in *Archive for Reformation History (ARG)* 78 (1987): 287–320. A critical edition of the Scottish 1581 Confession (the Negative or King’s Confession) by Ian Hazlett is in press, to appear in vol. 2/2 of the above series in 2010 or early 2011.

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