



Contents

Forward	7
1 Introduction	9
2 The Secession and The Formula of Subscription	17
3 The Atonement Controversy (1841–1845)	43
4 The Union Controversy (1863–1873)	83
5 Theological Ambivalence in the United Presbyterian Church	109
6 The 1879 United Presbyterian Church Declaratory Act	137
7 Summary	161
8 The Making of the Free Church Declaratory Act 1892	165
9 Conclusion	199
APPENDIX A	209
APPENDIX B	213
APPENDIX C	217
Bibliography	219







Forward

The doctrinal declension of a church or denomination that has subscribed to confessional standards has usually begun with a loosening of the requirements of those standards. When such denominations have ceased requiring full subscription to their confessional standards, they eventually fell into Socinianism or Arminianism. Those that became Arminian in their theology eventually fell into liberalism.

People who do not learn from history are bound to repeat its mistakes and certainly the church today is ignoring the history confessional declension. Pastor Ian Hamilton in *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy* argues that full subscription to the confessional standards is absolutely necessary to preserve a confessional church from doctrinal declension. He demonstrates from the history of the Scottish Presbyterian secession churches from 1733 to 1892 that decline occurs when the church changes the boundaries of subscription, proving from the 1879 United Presbyterian Church Declaratory Act and the 1892 Free Church Declaratory Act how system subscription leads to the theological declension of the Church.



The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

I first read this book a number of years ago in preparing for a seminar on subscription (full subscription versus system or good faith subscription) in my denomination. I found this book very helpful in establishing the historical case for the relation to loose subscription to theological decline.

The book has been improved with a new introduction that shows the usefulness for the book in our present circumstances, a chapter that details the adoption and effects of the Declaratory Act in the Free Church in 1892, and a concluding chapter, which argues for the importance of confessions in the modern church and answers four objections to the requirement of creedal subscription.

What strikes me most about this revised edition is its relevance to our situation today and Pastor Hamilton's careful research, scholarly precision, and warm style make the book very useful to the scholar and accessible to the ordinary reader. Much of what I read in chapter nine reminds me of the things that are taking place in my own denomination (the Presbyterian Church in America). If you care about the role of the confession in your church or denomination or if you want to study the issue of the importance of confessional subscription, you should read this book.

Dr Joseph Pipa, Jr
April 2010



1

Introduction

Creeds and Confessions have always been thought necessary and valuable by the Church, above all for the contribution they make to the Church's four basic tasks: worshipping, witnessing, teaching, and guarding the truth. These tasks, which J.I. Packer characteristically describes as 'doxological, declarative, didactic, and disciplinary',¹ have, throughout the centuries, been highlighted and identified by the Church's Creeds and Confessions. In fulfilling these tasks Creeds and Confessions have performed the function of 'helps', clarifying and exhibiting what the Church is, what it believes, and what it understands the Christian faith to be.

Because they are at best merely human compilations, Creeds and Confessions have, of necessity, a provisional character. The Westminster Confession of Faith spoke for all the Reformed Confessions when it stated: 'The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men,

1. J.I.Packer, *Towards a Confession for Tomorrow's Church* (Church Book Room Press, London, 1975), 4.



The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the scripture.²² They are necessarily provisional because they are the product of a particular moment in history and because they reflect the particular limited insights, however insightful, of mere men.

It should never be forgotten that Scripture alone is *norma normans* (has intrinsic authority), and Confessions are at best *norma normata* (have derived authority). Any Church which believes in *semper reformanda* will ever be ready to redefine and reshape its confessional formulae in harmony with the new insights the Holy Spirit may be pleased to give the Church, and to better commend the faith once delivered to the saints to contemporary society. Sadly, the cry, *Semper reformanda*, has too often been an excuse for ignoring the collected wisdom of the Church over many centuries. At the present time there is a culture of ‘chronological snobbery’, as C. S. Lewis termed the disease. It is absolutely and undeniably true that the best of Confessions of Faith are inherently inferior to the Church’s supreme standard of faith, God’s infallible Word. ‘Their authority,’ argued James Bannerman, ‘is inferior, not primary; secondary to the Word of God, and only binding in so far as, and no further than, they are a declaration or exhibition of the meaning of the Word of God...the authority of creeds and confessions is liable at any time to be tried and judged by their conformity or non-conformity with the Scriptures.’²³ However, to engage in confessional revision with no appreciation for the past theological insights of Christ’s Church is akin to designing a building with no reference to or appreciation of the history of architecture and the settled truths of design, proportion, perspective, and the axioms of applied mathematics.⁴

2. Westminster Confession of Faith I.X in *The Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1955), 6.

3. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (first published 1869; this edition Mack Publishing, New Jersey, 1972), vol. 2, p. 305.

4. John MacLeod writes, ‘There is a well-worn tag that the Lord has yet much light to break forth from His Word... At the same time as believers have no doubt in

What then is the role of Creeds and Confessions in the Church today? Indeed, do they have a role at all? Few would deny that we live in ‘an age of doctrinal unsettlement in which Western culture is drifting away from its historic moorings into a secularised pluriformity’.⁵ This contemporary pluralistic confusion in theology has not been conducive to the writing of new confessions. We have reached a point when, for many, ‘The two ecumenical creeds are downgraded to the category of Christian gang songs, to be sung as a loyal toast rather than recited as declarations of factual truth.’⁶

The response of the Church towards this doctrinal pluralism and uncertainty in relation to its Creeds and Confessions has been basically threefold:

1. Relax terms of subscription. In Scotland this was first introduced by the United Presbyterian Church in 1879, when subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith was no longer expected to be *simpliciter* but to an undefined substance of the faith contained within the Confession (see ch. 5). Although the proposed relaxation of the terms of subscription was to be minimal (‘here and there liberty’ as it was put), in practice it allowed people to believe almost anything – as the case of Fergus Ferguson proved only too graphically.

2. Relegate Creeds and Confessions to the status of ‘historic’, non-binding documents.

3. Revise the contents to fit the evolution of the Church’s thinking. This response is sometimes evoked in the light of the Holy Spirit’s continuing ministry of illuminating God’s truth to his Church, and sometimes in the light of the pressures of the age to be less particularistic and more consensual in theological discourse and confession.

regard to this matter, it holds of them in the measure in which they are instructed and established in the knowledge of the Word that they are equally confident that the further light that is to break out will not cancel nor detract from the brightness with which the light of the Word already shines. What is new will only intensify what is old. It will not darken it or throw it in the shade’ (*Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History* [reprinted Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974], p. 239).

5. Packer, *op. cit.*, p. 4

6. Packer, *op. cit.*, p. 5

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

What follows is an attempt to sketch the developments in confession thinking in the post-Reformation Scottish Presbyterian Church, in particular how the church(es) developed and subsequently modified subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The contemporary relevance of this study is seen in the recent history of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). During the past twenty or so years, the PCA has been marked, if not dominated, by the question of confessional subscription.⁷ 'Strict' subscriptionists and 'system' or 'good faith' subscriptionists have argued over what should be the PCA's position regarding ministerial and elder subscription to the WCF (the subordinate standard of faith for Presbyterian churches since 1729). This debate, however, has its origins in the earliest days of American Presbyterianism.⁸ It is hoped that this present study will provide a case study of confessional subscription and better enable confessional churches to appreciate the inevitable loosening of bonds when subscription becomes a matter of 'good faith' and not of commitment to stated propositions.

Apart from the Bible, the Westminster Confession of Faith has had the greatest influence in moulding the life and doctrine of Scottish Presbyterianism. For the first two hundred years of its existence, the Westminster Confession of Faith exercised an historic role as the 'watchdog' of theological orthodoxy within the Scottish Presbyterian Churches. As the Subordinate Standard of Faith, held to, and subscribed by the various strands within Presbyterianism, the Confession occupied a position of the greatest importance. Indeed, so much was the Confession

7. See Morton H. Smith, *The Case for Full Subscription to the Westminster Standards in the Presbyterian Church in America*, Greenville, USA, 1992. Smith argues the case for 'strict' as against 'system' or 'good faith' subscription.

8. The standard modern text on confessional subscription in the USA is *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. David W. Hall (The Covenant Foundation, Oak Ridge, 1997). Hall provides a wide-ranging series of chapters analysing the development of confessional subscription since the Adopting Act of 1729. See also the brief overview in D.G. Hart and John R. Meuther, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (P and R Publishing, New Jersey, 2007), pp. 40-49, 53-54, 57-58.

an integral part of the religious life in Scotland that it was considered by many to have an almost unimpeachable authority.

The particular aim of the present work is to trace and analyse the erosion of the Westminster Confession of Faith's status as *the* settled and constitutional symbol of Reformed theological orthodoxy among Scottish Seceders. The Scottish Secession Churches have remained something of a 'Cinderella' subject to students of Scottish Church history. Why this should be so remains a mystery. It was within the ranks of the Secession that Westminster Calvinism was first challenged and modified. It was a Secession Church, the United Presbyterian Church, which was the first Scottish Presbyterian denomination to qualify its official commitment to the Westminster Standards, in 1879. It has been the singular lack of historical and theological analysis of the Secession's position at the forefront of the movement for change within the Scottish Church that accounts for this present study.

The period covered has two termini, 1733 and 1892. That 1733 should be the *terminus a quo* is fairly obvious. In that year the Secession Church was born with the secession of Ebenezer Erskine and some others from the Church of Scotland. It may not be immediately obvious, however, why 1892 should be the *terminus ad quem* of the present work. In 1879, the Westminster Confession of Faith was relegated from its historic position as guardian of theological orthodoxy in the United Presbyterian Church. Although it was still retained as that Church's Subordinate Standard of Faith, subscription was no longer to the Westminster Confession of Faith as such, but to an undefined 'substance of the faith' contained within the Confession. In 1892, the Free Church Declaratory Act allowed liberty of opinion 'on such points in the Confession as do not enter into the substance of the Reformed Faith' (a substance that was nowhere defined or even sketched). Since that event, no significant advance has occurred in the relations of Scottish Presbyterianism to its Subordinate Standard of Faith.

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

A brief outline of the chapter divisions will indicate both the scope of the present work and the particular ways in which Westminster Calvinism was modified and eroded by Scottish Seceders.

Chapter 2: The relationship of the various branches of the Secession to the Formula of Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith will be examined. From a high point of unqualified subscription to the Confession of Faith in 1733, the various branches had all in some way or another qualified their Formulae of Subscription by the union of the main strands of the Secession in 1847.⁹

Chapter 3: In the second chapter focus is centred upon the much-neglected Atonement Controversy of 1841–1845. The argument of this chapter is central to the thesis. It will be argued that Professors Brown and Balmer qualified the teaching of the Westminster Standards on the Atonement, their Amyraldianism (or perhaps more accurately their ‘hypothetical universalism’) being supported by the United Secession Synod as not anti-confessional.

Chapter 4: In order to highlight the views of what other Presbyterians committed to the Westminster Standards’ thought of the relationship of the United Presbyterian Church to the Confession of Faith, the Union Controversy of 1863–1873 is examined.

Chapter 5: Along with chapter 2, this chapter holds the key to the argument of this book. The heresy trials of the Rev. Fergus Ferguson revealed a deep-seated theological ambivalence in the United Presbyterian Church. Although holding views on soteriology and eschatology which were decidedly contrary to the teaching of the Westminster Standards, and to all the historic creeds of Christendom, Ferguson was allowed to remain a minister of the United Presbyterian Church. This case did more than any other to highlight the growing liberalising of Scottish

9. See J. Ligon Duncan, III, ‘Owning the Confession: Subscription in the Scottish Presbyterian Tradition’ in Hall *op. cit.*, pp. 77-91.

theological thinking, and its increasingly critical attitude to the Westminster Standards.

Chapter 6: The climax of the erosion of Westminster Calvinism among Scottish Seceders was reached with the passing of the 1879 United Presbyterian Church Declaratory Act. Due to the terms of the Declaratory legislation, subscription was no longer required to the Confession of Faith as such, but to an indeterminate ‘substance of the faith’ contained within the Confession.

The erosion of Westminster Calvinism among Scottish Seceders was part of a long historical process. A true appreciation of the erosion is only possible when the constituent elements which contributed to the process of erosion are examined in their historical setting.

Chapter 7: The Making of the Free Church Declaratory Act and the subsequent secession of 1893 which led to the forming of the Free Presbyterian Church. The 1892 Act brought the Free Church into line with the United Presbyterian Church and prepared the way for the union of 1900.

Chronological Outline for Chapter 2

1711. Act X of the General Assembly required all ministers to subscribe the Westminster Confession of Faith without qualification.

1733. The secession of Ebenezer Erskine, William Wilson, Alexander Moncrieff, and James Fisher from the Church of Scotland. The 'new' Church stressed its continued adherence to the doctrine and Standards of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland.

1737. The publication of the Secession's Formula.

1752. The deposition of Thomas Gillespie from the ministry. (The first Relief Presbytery was formed in 1761, and the forming of a Synod followed shortly thereafter.)

1778. The publication of *The Re-exhibition of the Secession's Testimony*, containing some criticism of the historic relationship between the Church and the civil magistrate.

1796. Thomas McCrie's refusal to subscribe the Confession unless allowed to state where he considered it to be defective in its teaching on the Civil Magistrate. The General Associate Synod, to which McCrie belonged (Anti-burgher), allowed him to qualify his subscription.

1797. Preamble of the Associate Synod (Burgher) qualifying the Confession's supposed commitment to the use of intolerant measures in religion.

1804. Thomas McCrie's opposition to the General Associate Synod's new *Testimony* which, he claimed, qualified its adherence to the *Confession*.

1820. The union of the major branches of the Secession into the United Secession Church. The union was characterised by a loosening of the new Church's attachment to the *Confession*, and the protest submitted by three future professors of the Church (Brown, Balmer, and Harper) concerning the inadequacy of the *Confession*, as it stood, as a suitable document for ministers to subscribe.

1823. The Relief Church set up their first theological hall, and draw up a Formula for ministers to subscribe.

1847. The union of the United Secession Church and the Relief Church to form the United Presbyterian Church. The Church introduced a new Formula which was a significant departure from the model Formula of 1711.



2

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

1. The Nature of Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith Prevailing at the Time of the Secession of 1733

The story of the erosion of Calvinist orthodoxy within the Scottish Church makes for sorry reading. On the one hand, the acrimony and invective that marked many of the debates and pamphlets was certainly sub-Christian. This is not to deny that truth must be contended for, and often vigorously. On the other hand, however, the spiritual declension that went hand in hand with the confessional decline was marked by, what John Owen called, "The innate pride and vanity of the minds of men."¹

Tracing the history and pathology of confessional declension will give us a sense of how rapidly minor concessions to pressure can lead to doctrinal moderatism and even indifferentism.

Act X of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, May 22, 1711,² regulated its attitude to confessional subscription

1. John Owen, 'The Nature and Cause of Apostasy' in *The Works of John Owen* (The Banner of Truth Trust ed., London, 1965), Vol. VII, pp. 123.

2. *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638-1842* (Edinburgh, 1843), pp. 453-456.



The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

at the time of the 1733 Secession. This Act introduced a stricter Formula than had previously held in the Church, and was probably intended as much as a protection against those outwith the Church, as a ‘restraint on those within the Church’.³ The Act related only to ministers and probationers. Two sets of questions were put to each respectively, and each was in turn required to subscribe the Formula. The second question put to ministers at their ordination revealed the extent of commitment required by the Church to the Westminster Confession, its Subordinate Standard of Faith:

Do you sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith...to be founded upon the Word of God; and do you acknowledge the same as the confession of your faith...?

To underline the minister’s personal belief in, and commitment to, the Confession, he was required to sign the following Formula:

I – do hereby declare, that I do sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith...to be the truths of God; and I do own the same as the confession of my faith.⁴

It is interesting to note, in passing, that few historians have credited the Church with an increased desire for purity of doctrine in its passing of the 1711 Act. Innes suggested that the tightening of subscription was due largely to ‘a vague but strong dread of heresy’,⁵ and a fear of Episcopalians entering the ministry,⁶ while Cooper maintained that the whole legislation

3. A. T. Innes, *The Law of Creeds in Scotland* (1st ed.; Edinburgh and London, 1867), p. 88.

4. Acts, *op. cit.*, pp. 455-456. Cf. Innes, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-87; J. Cooper, *Confessions of Faith and Formulas of Subscription* (Glasgow, 1907), pp. 61-67.

5. Innes, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

6. *Ibid.* Cf. Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

of the period 1694–1711 was aimed ‘not so much (at) the preservation of the Faith, as the protection of the party into whose hands the Revolution had placed ecclesiastical power in Scotland’.⁷

Whatever the precise reasons behind the adoption of the 1711 Formula, it seemed to impose on all ministers an absolute commitment to the doctrine of the Confession – a commitment, moreover, that allowed no reserve or qualification, written or mental. This understanding of the nature of confessional subscription imposed by the Act of 1711 was challenged by C. G. McCrie in his major work *The Confessions of the Church of Scotland*.⁸ In this work, McCrie maintained that the Presbyterian Church in Scotland allowed ministers ‘a certain measure of liberty to depart from the Confessional standard’ during this period.⁹ McCrie supplied two examples to support his contention. In as much as the Secession inherited its Confessional Standards from the Church of Scotland, it is important to know precisely in what light the established Church viewed its Standards, and what laxity, if any, it allowed its ministers in subscription.

The Cases of James Wardlaw and Thomas Gillespie

McCrie maintained that when James Wardlaw – one of the twelve ministers who signed the *Representation* against the Act of Assembly condemning the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*¹⁰ – was translated from Cruden to the charge of Dunfermline vacated by Ralph Erskine in 1718, he was allowed to renew his subscription to the Formula with an explanation regarding the extent of the atonement.¹¹

The other example cited by McCrie was that of Thomas Gillespie. In 1741, the same Presbytery of Dunfermline met

7. Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

8. C.G. McCrie, *The Confessions of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1907).

9. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

10. J. Brown, *Gospel Truth Accurately Stated and Illustrated* (Edinburgh, 1817), pp. 141ff.

11. McCrie, *Confessions, op. cit.*, p. 233.

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

to ordain Gillespie at the parish of Carnock. Having studied theology under the nonconformist Dr Philip Doddridge in England, Gillespie, so McCrie maintained,

(formed) opinions respecting the province of magistracy which prevented him from giving an unqualified subscription to the Formula of 1711. He requested to be allowed to sign with an explanation. The court agreed to accept the qualified subscription, and his admission to the benefice was proceeded with.¹²

It is instructive to note the sources McCrie used to make his assertions. Of the three sources mentioned, John Brown's *Gospel Truth*,¹³ Fraser's *Life and Diary of Ebenezer Erskine*,¹⁴ and Struthers' *History of the Relief Church*,¹⁵ not one belongs to the primary category, and none mention the Presbytery minutes which are supposed to contain the instances of qualified subscription.

A careful examination of the Dunfermline Presbytery Records for the dates under review reveals no mention of either Wardlaw or Gillespie qualifying their subscription to the

12. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

13. Brown states that of Wardlaw 'we know almost nothing', *op. cit.*, p. 136. The section in Brown's *Gospel Truth* on Wardlaw covers just three lines.

14. D. Fraser, *Life and Diary of Rev. Ebenezer Erskine* (Edinburgh, 1831). McCrie seems to have made a mistake in his source material at this point. Fraser's work on Ebenezer Erskine reveals no trace of any reference to Wardlaw's supposed qualification to the Formula of Subscription. However, in his companion work, *Life and Diary of Rev. Ralph Erskine*, published in Edinburgh in 1834, Fraser does make mention of the supposed qualification. Fraser does not, however, quote any primary sources. Quoting from Brown's *Gospel Truth*, p. 159, he writes: 'It appears from the Presbytery Records, that when called to renew his subscription to the Confession of Faith, he (Wardlaw) did it with an explanation regarding the extent of the death of Christ...' (p. 108). As will be shown, the Presbytery Records make no mention of any qualification.

15. G. Struthers, *History of the Relief Church*, Glasgow, 1843. Struthers helpfully surveys the Relief Church's attitude to subscription, but he also confuses 'hearsay' with fact when he states that Wardlaw and Gillespie certainly qualified their subscription to the Confession of Faith. No primary sources are adduced to substantiate the claim.

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

Formula.¹⁶ On October 29, 1718, Wardlaw was accepted by the parish of Dunfermline as the minister they desired,¹⁷ the Presbytery arranging to meet formally at a later date to ratify the call.¹⁸ Wardlaw was officially admitted to the charge at the meeting of Presbytery on November 20, 1718.¹⁹ Nowhere in the minutes is anything unusual mentioned about Wardlaw's subscription, and there is certainly no record in the minutes of Wardlaw qualifying his subscription to the Formula as McCrie maintained.

Brown's *Gospel Truth* does mention a controversy over subscription involving Ralph Erskine and James Wardlaw,²⁰ but it had nothing to do with Wardlaw's induction in 1718, or with his supposed inability to subscribe the Confession's teaching on the extent of the atonement.

The case of Gillespie is equally baffling. The minutes of the Presbytery concerning Gillespie's ordination at Carnock, August 19, 1741, read:

Mr. Gillespie was called in and having declared his allegiance to the Doctrine worship and Government of this Church, and (sic.) judicially signed the Confession of Faith and Formula.²¹

16. *Register of the Actings and Proceedings of the Presbytery of Dunfermline* (n.d.). Vol. V September 24, 1717–April 4, 1729. Vol. VI April 23, 1729–October 9, 1745.

17. *Ibid.*, V, p. 29.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 30. It is interesting to note that the Presbytery on this occasion renewed their 'former Declaration against Patronage'.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

20. Brown, *Gospel Truth*, *op. cit.*, p. 76-77. In 1729, the Synod of Fife sought to impose on all its members the General Assembly's ruling on the Marrow controversy. It resolved that all the ministers within its bounds should subscribe a revised Formula indicating agreement with the 1721 Act of Assembly. Erskine refused, along with Hog and Wardlaw, to sign this, and was allowed by his own Presbytery to subscribe the Confession in the following terms:

I Ralph Erskine, minister at Dunfermline, do subscribe the above – written Confession of Faith, as the confession of my faith, according to the above-written formula, conform to the Acts of the General Assembly *allenaryly* (*Register*, *op. cit.*, V, p. 76).

21. *Register*, *op. cit.*, VI, p. 359.

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

The actual ordination took place at Carnock on September 4, 1741.²² Gillespie was admitted and ordained with no mention being made of any qualifications or explanations. A further examination of the Dunfermline Presbytery Records of *Subscription to the Confession of Faith and the Formula From 24 February 1697 to 23 April 1793*²³ reveals nothing but unqualified subscription by all those in the register.

McCrie's only written source for stating so categorically that Gillespie qualified his subscription was Struthers' *History of the Relief Church*. An examination of Struthers²⁴ shows that he gives no reference to the Presbytery minutes, but relies on the 'personal reminiscence'²⁵ of the Rev. Dr John Erskine, who wrote a memoir of Gillespie in 1774. In the memoir Erskine wrote:

Before he (Gillespie) was admitted (to Carnock) he subscribed the Confession of Faith, and Formula, with a single explanation respecting the power of the civil magistrate.²⁶

Struthers' comment that 'considering the intimacy which

22. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

23. *Subscription to the Confession of Faith and Formula. From February 1697 to 23 April 1793* (n.d.).

24. Struthers, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

26. *Ibid.* Other sources and authorities make the same assertion. The *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* recounts that 'When signing the "Confession of Faith" he (Gillespie) took exception to Chapter xxiii, in which are defined the powers of the civil magistrate.' V, 'Synods of Fife, and of Angus and Mearns' (Edinburgh, 1925), p. 10.

Nathaniel Morren, in his *Annals of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, from the Final Secession in 1739 to the Origin of the Relief in 1752*, maintained that 'It is... rather a remarkable circumstance, and not generally known, that when he (Gillespie) signed the "Formula" and "Confession of Faith" at his admission at Carnock, it was with an explanation or reservation respecting "The power of the civil magistrate"' (I, Edinburgh, 1837, p. 276). Morren says in a footnote that his authority for the above statement was the 'Case for the Donors of his Church laid before the Assembly of 1774' (*Annals*, p. 276). Unfortunately, an extensive search of the Scottish Records Office failed to bring the 'Case for the Donors' to light. A. T. Innes also maintains that Gillespie signed with an 'explanation or modification' (*Law of Creeds in Scotland*, 2nd ed.; Edinburgh, 1902, p. 213).

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

subsisted between them, he (Erskine) could not be mistaken',²⁷ places McCrie's assertions in their proper light! What we are left with is a 'personal intimacy' and not documented proof, to substantiate McCrie's contention that ministers were allowed a certain degree of laxity in subscribing the Confession. It is undeniable that Gillespie did hold views on the relation of the civil magistrate to the Church which seemed to clash with the Confession's teaching. Struthers gives ample evidence of this,²⁸ and few would deny that he had proved his case. However, the point at issue is McCrie's assertion that the *Presbytery*, an official church court, allowed Gillespie to qualify his subscription. This cannot be sustained. The complete lack of documentary evidence compelled Struthers to argue that the Presbytery allowed Gillespie to make a *verbal* qualification.²⁹ This conjecture virtually accuses the Presbytery of wearing two hats – allowing reserve and qualification in private, while maintaining a front of unqualified orthodoxy in public. As far as the documentary evidence goes, however, there is no evidence whatsoever that Gillespie was allowed to qualify his subscription to the Confession. Struthers' conclusion that ministers during this period were 'not understood to be bound by every iota which the Confession contained',³⁰ compounds his failure to check the requisite Presbyterian records, his only example being Wardlaw's supposed explanation regarding the extent of the atonement when admitted minister of Dunfermline in 1718!

The fact that ministers were required to subscribe the Confession without reserve or qualification did not mean that everyone agreed with all of the Confession's teachings. The rise of Moderatism, and the Church of Scotland's unwillingness to prosecute ministers who blatantly disregarded some of the Confession's fundamental doctrines, was an indication that 'orthodoxy' was something of an ambivalent concept to some in the Church.

27. Struthers, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

30. *Ibid.*

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

However, at the time of the Secession of 1733, there is no written evidence to suggest that ministers were allowed any laxity when subscribing the Confession of Faith.

2. The Secession Formula of 1737³¹

The Secession of 1733 was precipitated by the action of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in regard to a proposal which came before them at their meeting in May 1731. An overture was presented concerning the method of planting vacant churches. This overture sought to restrict the election of ministers to local heritors and the elders of the congregation, a proposal which rendered the Church's protests against the 1712 Patronage Act meaningless.³² The overture was resisted by Ebenezer Erskine of Stirling. Erskine spoke out against the measure which the Assembly had approved.

I can find no warrant from the word of God to confer the spiritual privileges of His house upon the rich beyond the poor; whereas by this Act, the man with the gold ring and gay clothing is preferred unto the man with the vile raiment and poor attire.³³

Erskine was rebuked by his Synod for his outspoken criticism of the Assembly, and was later suspended by the General Assembly from his ministerial duties. The situation was brought to a crisis when Erskine and three others – William Wilson, Alexander Moncrieff, and James Fisher – met at Gairney Bridge near Kinross in December 1733, and constituted themselves into the Associate Presbytery.³⁴

31. Contained in A. Gib, *The Present Truth: A Display of the Secession Testimony*, I (Edinburgh, 1774), pp. ixff.

Cf. *Proceedings of the United Presbyterian Synod*, VI (Glasgow, 1880), Report XXIII, Appendix A, pp. 899ff.

32. *Proceedings of the United Presbyterian Synod*, *op. cit.*, p. 891. A helpful summary of the controversy is found in W. Ferguson, *Scotland 1689 to the Present* (Edinburgh and London, 1968), pp. 121ff.

33. *The whole Works of the late Ebenezer Erskine*, ed. by James Fisher, I, p. 504, quoted by Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

34. Gib, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-35.

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

Although reconciliation was attempted over the next few years, it became clear that the secession of Erskine, Wilson, Moncrieff, and Fisher was to be final and irrevocable. In 1737, the new denomination adopted a Formula of Questions to be put to those requesting licence as ministers of the Associate Presbytery. The Formula adopted indicated that the Associate Presbytery in no way thought of itself departing from the strict adherence to the Confession of Faith required by the Act of 1711.

Question 2 of the Formula, which all ministers, probationers, and elders had to sign, retained the distinctive wording of the 1711 Act.

Do you sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith...And do you acknowledge the same Confession as the Confession of your faith...?³⁵

The only changes of any significance in the Formula from the model one of 1711 were the removal of the clause in the 1711 Act 'ratified by law in the year 1690', and the inserting into Question 2 of the requirement to 'own and believe...the whole doctrine contained in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms...'³⁶

In the light of the early Seceders' commitment to the Standards of the Church of Scotland, Thomas McCrie considered that:

Those ministers who left the communion of the established church...entertained no new or peculiar principles, different from those which were contained in the Standards of the Church of Scotland. With these they were fully satisfied...they composed no new standards... [They] approved of, adopted, and witnessed for them...as they had been received and owned by the reformed church in this land.³⁷

35. *The Formula of Questions originally framed and settled by the Associate Presbytery*, Gib, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

36. *Ibid.*

37. T. McCrie, *Statement of the Difference Between the Profession of the Reformed Church of Scotland as Adopted by the Seceders, and the Profession Contained in the New Testimony and Other Acts* (Edinburgh, 1871 edition), p. 40.

3. The Dawning of a New Era³⁸

The General Associate Synod³⁹ (Anti-burgher) entered the 1790s reviewing its relation to Chapter XXIII of the Confession of Faith. The Formula required that assent be given to the 'whole doctrine' of the Confession, and some in the Synod were beginning to question how possible such an assent was, given the terms of the controversial chapter.⁴⁰ The matter was

38. J. McKerrow, *History of the Secession Church*, II (Edinburgh, 1839), pp. 42-48, 301-328; *Proceedings of the United Presbyterian Synod*, *op. cit.*, p. 905.

39. The unity of the Secession Church was broken in 1747 by a dispute as to whether the Seceders should swear a certain clause in the oath taken by the free burgesses of a few Scottish towns. Due to the influence of Adam Gib, those who opposed the taking of the Burgess Oath (the Anit-Burghers) excommunicated their brethren who refused to take disciplinary measures over the matter (Burghers).

40. The most objectionable section of the controversial chapter was the third section: 'The civil magistrate... hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed...' (*The Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1955, p. 36).

The role of the civil magistrate in relation to the Church as defined in the Westminster Confession of Faith has long been a matter for dispute. While many have argued that the sections in Chapters xx, xxiii, xxxi referring to the civil magistrate give him a degree of authority in the governing of the Church, and the power to 'use the sword' to suppress error, others have argued that such a view misinterprets the Confession's meaning.

James Bannerman asked the question: 'Is it true that the Westminster Confession of Faith arms the civil magistrate with a power to destroy the liberty of Christ's Church, giving to the state a proper jurisdiction in spiritual things?', and to his question he gave an unequivocal answer: 'The uniform and undeniable doctrine of the Confession of Faith... is a denial of the proper jurisdiction of the civil magistrate in spiritual and ecclesiastical matters' (*The Church of Christ*, I [first published 1869; references here to the Mack, ed., New Jersey, 1960], pp. 173, 176).

The whole chapter in Bannerman entitled 'The Doctrine of the Westminster Confession on Church and State' (pp. 171-185) is worthy of careful examination. He represents the views of the conservative wing of the Free Church during the troubled years of the 1860s on this subject. Cf. R. Shaw, *The Reformed Faith* (Inverness, 1974), pp. xx-xxiii.

The importance, however, of the Secession Churches' attitude to the role of the civil magistrate lies in what *they understood* the Confession to teach on this matter. It is also worth noting that the Secession Churches' 'qualification' of the Confession's teaching on the civil magistrate was not the first of its kind within Presbyterianism. In 1729, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

brought to a head by the refusal of two licentiates (Thomas McCrie was one) in 1796 to submit to ordination unless they were allowed to qualify their assent to the second question of the Formula.⁴¹ The matter was brought before the Synod in May 1796, and a committee appointed to consider what could be done. The result was a declaration by the Synod to the effect that notwithstanding the Confession's teaching in Chapter XX section 4, and in Chapter XXIII,⁴³

... they approve of no other means of bringing men into the Church, or retaining them in it, than such as are spiritual... persuasion not force, the power of the gospel not the sword of the civil magistrate...⁴⁴

This 'declaratory legislation' was constructed to enable those with scruples respecting the Confession's teaching on the role of the civil magistrate to sign the Formula. (McCrie subsequently changed his views, and seceded from the denomination.)

While this was taking place in the General Associate Synod, the Associate Synod (Burgher) was involved in a similar, though more acrimonious, debate. The outcome of the debate was the Synod's acceptance of a Preamble in 1797 which clearly qualified

were adopted by the original Synod in North America as its Confession of Faith. In the original Adopting Act, the Synod declared that it did not receive the Confession's views on the civil magistrate '... in any sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over synods with respect to their ministerial authority; or power to persecute any for their religion...' (Quoted in A. A. Hodge, *Confession of Faith* [first published 1869, reference here is to the Banner of Truth, ed., London, 1958], p. 21). In 1787, the Synod altered the Confession by removing the offending clauses in Chapters xx, xxiii, xxxi. Cf. P. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III (New York, 1878), pp. 645, 653, 669.

41. McKerrow, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

42. *Acts and Proceedings of the General Associate Synod*, IV, 1795–1820 (Edinburgh?, n.d.), pp. 40ff.

43. In an age when 'liberty' was the watchword, and battle-cry, of many diverse movements, it is striking to find that the ecclesiastical scene in Scotland did not escape the influence of this phenomenon.

44. McKerrow, *op. cit.*, p. 46; *Acts and Proceedings of the General Associate Synod*, *op. cit.*, pp. 42–43.

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

the denomination's commitment to its Subordinate Standard. The Preamble declared:

Whereas some parts of the Standard-books of this Synod have been interpreted as favouring compulsory measures in religion, the Synod hereby declares, That they do not require an approbation of any such principle from any candidate for license or ordination...⁴⁵

The use of a Preamble to qualify the Church's understanding of the Confession's teaching on the role of the civil magistrate in relation to church affairs was devised only after a large number of petitions from sessions and congregations reached the Synod objecting to any alteration in the Church's historic relation to the Westminster Standards.⁴⁶

McKerrow in his *History of the Secession* makes the observation that the terms of the Preamble reflected in substance part of the 1778 *Re-exhibition of the Testimony*.⁴⁷ The *Testimony* contained the following declaration:

... it must be acknowledged, that the enforcing of religious duties with civil penalties; and, in too many instances, blending the affairs of church and state with one another, is totally inconsistent with the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom.⁴⁸

In effect, the 1797 Preamble was a compromise measure. It was designed to alleviate the scruples of those who baulked at the Confession's teaching on the supposedly intolerant duties of the civil magistrate, and to pacify those who were against any

45. *Minutes of the Associate Synod, September 1787 to April 1806*, V (Edinburgh?, n.d.), p. 2245. Cf. McKerrow, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

46. McKerrow, *op. cit.*, p. 316; J. Gibson, *Free Churchism V Broad Churchism* (Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1870), p. 22. Of the forty-one petitions received by the Synod, twenty-seven were against any alteration in the Formula; nine were in favour of altering Question 2 of the Formula; and five were in favour of delaying any proposals for change.

47. *Re-Exhibition of the Testimony* (Glasgow, 1779), p. 321.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

tampering with the Formula itself. The measure led to a great deal of turmoil within the Church, but it was retained.

4. Thomas McCrie and the 1804 'Narrative and Testimony'

The relation of the Secession Churches to the Confession of Faith was further a cause for dispute at the turn of the nineteenth century. The publication of Thomas McCrie's *Statement of the Difference between the Profession of the Reformed Church of Scotland as adopted by the Seceders, and the Profession contained in the New Testimony and Other Acts, Lately adopted by the General Associate Synod...*,⁴⁹ in 1807, reflected his concern over certain new trends of thought which he believed were undermining the Church's historic relation to the Reformed faith.⁵⁰

On May 1, 1804, the Synod approved the revision of their Testimony by adopting the following motion:

The Synod agree to adopt the Introduction, Narrative, and Testimony, as now corrected and enlarged, as the term of admission for those who shall apply for joining in communion with us...⁵¹

The point at issue for McCrie was the alteration this made to the Church's Formula. Prior to 1804, the General Associate Synod required its ministers to subscribe the Formula's requirements without recourse to any qualifying factors (except, of course, for the declaration of 1796 regarding the civil magistrate). In that year, however, the Synod somewhat revised Question 2 of the Formula, approving the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms only in so far as they were 'agreeable to the declaration in the Narrative and Testimony enacted by the General Associate Synod in the year 1804...'⁵²

49. T. McCrie, *Statement*, *op. cit.*

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 40ff.

51. *Acts and Proceedings of the General Associate Synod*, *op. cit.*, p. 236 (1st May 1804). Also see McKerrow, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

52. *Narrative and Testimony, agreed upon and enacted by the General Associate Synod* (Edinburgh, 1804), p. 249.

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

McCrie's main objection to the Synod's new *Narrative and Testimony* centred upon a statement found in the introduction:

The foundation upon which we rest the whole of our Ecclesiastical Constitution is the testimony of God in his word... We acknowledge (the years 1638 to 1650) to have been a period of eminent ecclesiastical purity; but we call no man nor church Master. One is our Master, even Christ; and his word is our only un-erring rule...⁵³

While McCrie did not in any way object to the sentiment of the above statement, he did object to what he considered the usurping of the time-honoured place given to the Confession in the Secession. He considered that the new *Testimony* by-passed the Church's theological heritage, establishing a precedent by examining doctrines in the light of Holy Scripture without recourse to the Church's doctrinal Standards.⁵⁴

The point at issue is not to assess how right, or how wrong, the Synod was in adopting such an approach. Rather, it is to underline the fact that it was creating a precedent in so doing. McKerrow, while praising the Synod for adopting the new procedure in revising its *Narrative and Testimony*,⁵⁵ admits that it was creating a precedent by departing from the first *Testimony* of the Original Seceders.⁵⁶ Considering that McCrie himself had been partly responsible for the Synod qualifying its adherence to the Confession's teaching on the civil magistrate in 1796, it is quite ironic that a mere eight years later he renounced his former position and accused the Synod of changing the Confession's historic place in the life of the Church.

The General Associate Synod's willingness to examine critically the Westminster Standards is best seen in the following extract from the *Narrative and Testimony*:

53. *Ibid.*, p. 9 of Introduction.

54. T. McCrie, *Statement, op. cit.*, pp. 47-48.

55. McKerrow, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

56. *Ibid.*

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

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 Westminster Confession of Faith), we are not precluded from embracing, upon due consideration, any further light which may afterward arise from the word of God, about any article of divine truth.⁵⁷

Such a statement at first sight might seem fairly innocuous, as it merely elaborates the Confession's own teaching.⁵⁸ However, the Confession had stood as a well-nigh impregnable bulwark of orthodox theology and church polity since the 1690s, and the Synod's refusal to acknowledge it as a settled, unimpeachable reality in the life of the Church indicated, at least, a certain recasting of thought regarding the status of the Confession of Faith.⁵⁹ For one Church at least, the Confession of Faith was no longer considered the 'sacred cow' of orthodox Presbyterian theology.⁶⁰

Due to these developments within the Secession, by the early years of the nineteenth century the Westminster Confession of Faith was no longer accepted *simpliciter* as their Subordinate Standard of Faith.⁶¹ The nature of the change, however, in no way loosened the Secession's commitment to the Calvinistic theology of the Confession. Nowhere do we find the Secession

57. *Narrative and Testimony*, *op. cit.*, p. 13 of Introduction; cf, pp. 195-198. See also McKerrow, *op. cit.*, p. 125; A. C. Cheyne, 'The Westminster Standards: A Century of Re-appraisal', *Scottish Church History Society Records*, XIV (1963), p. 204.

58. '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...' (*Subordinate Standards*, *op. cit.*, Chapter xxxi, section iv, p. 46).

59. Cheyne, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

60. This attitude was seen in the Atonement Controversy in the 1840s. While the vast majority of the United Secession Church examined the teachings of professors Brown and Balmer in the light of Scripture first, and the Confession second, a small minority tenaciously clung to the Confession as the sole arbiter in theological debate.

61. The adoption of a new Testimony by the General Associate Synod led to another split in Scottish Presbyterianism. McCrie and Professor Bruce were responsible for forming a Constitutional Presbytery which sought to stand by the historic attachment of the Secession to the Confession of Faith. Cf. J. Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh, 1974), p. 236.

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

Churches granting any degree of liberty to those who could not *personally* own the doctrine of the Standards. Nonetheless, the slow process of erosion had begun – although on articles which were of relatively minor importance.⁶² The initial breach had been made, and with gathering momentum the Standards were subjected to further, more detailed, and critical scrutiny.

5. The Union of the Secession in 1820

The union of 1820 brought together the major branches of the Secession excluding the Relief Church. The second article of the Basis of Union⁶³ practically canonised the Secession's criticism of the Confession's teaching on the civil magistrate, and established as a point of principle the new Church's attitude towards that problem issue. The Article maintained that:

...we do not approve or require an approbation of any thing in those books (the Subordinate Standards) which teaches, or may be thought to teach, compulsory or persecuting and intolerant principles of religion.⁶⁴

The chief significance of the Basis of Union lies, however, in other areas. In the second article of the Basis of Union, the United Secession Church introduced a new form of language to characterise its relation to the Westminster Confession. The article stated:

We retain the Westminster Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as the confession of our faith, expressive of the sense in which we understand the Holy Scriptures...⁶⁵

62. Cheyne, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

63. *Minutes of the United Associate Synod*, I, 1820-1836 (Glasgow, n.d.), pp. 1-2. McKerrow, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

64. *Minutes of the United Associate Synod*, I, *op. cit.*, p. 1; McKerrow, *op. cit.*, p. 403.

65. *Minutes of the United Associate Synod*, I, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Agreed September 13, 1820.

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

The form of language used in the second article of the Basis of Union was incorporated into the new *Formula for the Ordination of Ministers*. Question 2 of the Formula asked:

Do you acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as the confession of your faith, expressive of the sense in which you understand the Scriptures...?⁶⁶

The significant phrase in each case is ‘expressive of the sense’. Up until this point in time there had been little dubiety regarding the individual’s commitment to the Confession, as he was required to subscribe its whole doctrine as the confession of his faith – except, of course, for the article on the civil magistrate. The form of language used in the new Formula introduced, however, a certain measure of ambiguity into the situation. The use of the new phraseology might well have passed without much discussion but for an incident which focused attention upon the Church’s relation to the Confession of Faith.

During the 1820 Synod, three ministers – Brown, Balmer, and Harper (all future professors in the United Secession Church), along with some others – presented a document in which they criticised the nature of the Church’s relation to the Confession. The statement read:

The undersigned regret that they cannot express an unqualified approbation of the formula adopted by the United Synods of the Secession Church – and crave that it be marked in the records of the Synod – that without calling in question any doctrine contained in our subordinate standards, and even admitting that they do not contain a particle of error, they are yet so multifarious and extensive, that in their opinion, it must be very difficult for ministers, and still more for licentiates and elders to examine every proposition in these standards with such care, as to be qualified to give a rational assent to it with the solemnity of an oath. Besides, it will be universally admitted

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

that these standards contain some things, the knowledge and belief of which are not essential as qualifications for office in the Church of Christ.⁶⁷

It was precisely this statement, allied to the ‘novel’ language used in the Formula, which precipitated yet another schism within the ranks of the Secession. Seven ministers and five elders seceded from the new united Church in 1821, unhappy with the ‘new’ theological emphases they believed to be displayed in the Basis of Union.⁶⁸ This small rump joined with the remnant of the Old Light Anti-Burghers, the new body calling itself the Associate Synod of Original Seceders.⁶⁹ It is difficult to assess how credible were the claims of those who saw the new Formula as a significant departure from the universally binding Formulae of past generations. Little has been written on this specific point apart from brief comments in the shorter writings of two very different commentators. From a more liberal perspective, George Pearson considered that the phrase ‘expressive of the sense’ put the Confession in its proper and ‘inferior’ place in the life of the Church. In his understanding, the phrase indicated that the minister was not obliged to believe the ‘whole doctrine’ of the Confession, but only regard it as ‘an exhibition of the sense in which the Scriptures are to be understood’.⁷⁰ From a decidedly more conservative perspective, James Gibson, a prominent figure during the union controversy in the Free Church in the 1860s, concurred with Pearson’s interpretation. However justified linguistically, he argued that theologically, the individual was no longer bound to subscribe the Confession in its entirety, but only as ‘expressive’ of his own sense of Scripture.⁷¹

67. *Ibid.*, p. 25-26. A paper given to the Synod on September 14, 1820, but dated September 13.

68. C. G. McCrie, *The Church of Scotland: Her Divisions and Reunions* (Edinburgh, 1901), p. 154.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

70. G. Pearson, *The Principles of the United Presbyterian Church, wherein do they differ from other Presbyterian Churches?* (Glasgow, 1877), p. 2. A paper originally given at the Glasgow Association of United Presbyterian elders, January 18, 1877.

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

While it is open to doubt whether the offending phrase is linguistically chargeable with liberalising the terms of the Formula, the very fact that the phrase was considered ambiguous, to say the least, by some, and was prominent at a time when young ministers were openly criticising the *scope* of the Church's attachment to the Confession, gave it a notoriety that kindled the fires of theological debate. The chief significance of the whole controversy lies perhaps in the complete absence of criticism from the Synod regarding the document submitted by Brown, Balmer, and Harper. At least in this, something of a precedent had been set: ministers of a major Scottish Presbyterian Church had expressed publicly reservation over the nature of its attachment to the Confession of Faith, and the Synod concurred with their criticism.

6. The Relief Church and the Westminster Confession of Faith

Before advancing to the 1847 union of the Secession and the Relief, it will be necessary to outline the relation that existed between the Relief Church and the Westminster Confession of Faith. From its inception⁷² the Relief Church held to a strict and total commitment to the 'whole doctrine' of the Confession. The measure of the Church's attachment to the Confession was illustrated in the Synod's prosecution of one of its members, the Rev. James Smith of Dunfermline.⁷³

In 1789, Smith published two pamphlets, *An Essay on Confessing the Truth* and *A Discourse on the Necessity, Nature, and Design, of Christ's Sufferings*,⁷⁴ aimed at refuting some of the teaching of a Church of Scotland minister, the Rev. Dr. William McGill of Ayr.⁷⁵ In so doing, Smith commented that systems of theology

71. Gibson, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

72. The Relief Church owed its origin to a dispute over the exercise of patronage in the parish of Inverkeithing in 1752.

73. See the whole section in Struthers, *op. cit.*, pp. 352-367.

74. J. Smith, *An Essay on Confessing the Truth* (Edinburgh, 1789); *A Discourse on the Necessity, Nature, and Design, of Christ's Sufferings* (Edinburgh, 1789).

75. McGill published in 1786 a treatise which reflected a Socinian interpretation of the atonement: *A Practical Essay on the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh, 1786). The

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

and creeds were too highly revered, and seemed also to stray into a Socinian interpretation of the atonement. The Relief Synod initiated a process of heresy against Smith, but before discipline could be applied he deserted to the established Church.⁷⁶ The reaction of the Synod to Smith's declared rejection of parts of the Confession, and his proposal to subscribe it only in so far as it agreed with Scripture, was swift and unequivocal. To prevent heretics gaining 'access to the denomination under the guise of subscribing the Confession of Faith, *so far as it agrees with the Scripture*',⁷⁷ the Synod passed the following overture:

That the minister who presides in the Work of Ordination, or admission of any minister (not formerly ordained by any of the Presbyteries subject to this Synod) shall in the questions to be put to the person to be ordained or thus admitted keep precisely by the Act of Assembly relative to that affair and, in particular, shall not ask, 'Do you agree to the Confession of Faith, *in so far as agreeable to the Word of God*', but put the question in the identical words enjoined by the Assembly...⁷⁸

In the light of the Synod's declaration as recorded in the *Minutes*, Struthers' wrote that:

The meaning of this injunction was, that every person to be ordained should receive the Westminster Confession, *as the confession of his faith*. They wished it to be made a test of orthodoxy...⁷⁹

Associate Synod published a pamphlet in 1788 warning against the Socinianism in McGill's treatise: *A Warning against Socinianism* (Falkirk, 1788). For an overview of the controversy, see A. McNair, *Scot's Theology in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1928), pp. 10ff. The section in McNair dealing with the controversy reads at times more like an *apologia* for McGill and his views than sober history. In 1789, McGill was forced to apologise to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr for his views.

76. *Minutes of the Relief Synod 1733-1829*, I (n.d.), p. 98. The Synod's case against Smith is given in good detail, pp. 91ff.

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.* The Synod unanimously adopted the overture. It is a little ambiguous, but the reference in the overture to the 'Act of Assembly' is most probably the regulative Act of 1711.

79. Struthers, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

It is undeniable that in passing such an overture, the Relief Church was expressing publicly a committed and unreserved attachment to the Confession of Faith.⁸⁰ It is difficult, therefore, to agree with John Macleod when he wrote of the Relief Church as 'always' professing itself less strict on doctrinal issues than the other branches of the Secession.⁸¹ An examination of the *Minutes* of the Relief Synod from 1773 gives no indication that it treated doctrinal matters less strictly than the other Secession Churches.

Although formed in 1761, it was not until 1823, when the Church founded its own theological hall, that a Formula of Questions was drawn up to be put to licentiates and ministers at ordination.⁸² Question 2 of the Formula asked:

Do you own, and will you adhere to the doctrine of the Westminster Confession of Faith as founded on and consistent with the Word of God, except in so far as said Confession recognises the power of the civil magistrate to interfere in religious concerns?⁸³

Two points should be noted here. First, the Relief explicitly considers the Confession to teach intolerant and persecuting principles as valid means to uphold true religion. Its disavowal of such principles in its Formula brought it into line with the other branches of the Secession. Secondly, the Formula was so constructed as to allow ministers a certain degree of laxity in subscription. With this in mind, Struthers argued that the new laxity reflected the liberality of spirit which had characterised the Relief during its existence. He maintained that

The adoption of the stringent mode prescribed in later times by the Church of Scotland (the Act of 1711), and which was

80. This would mean that the Relief Church used the strictest Formula of subscription available to it.

81. Macleod, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

82. C.G. McCrie, *Confessions, op. cit.*, p. 238; Struthers, *op. cit.*, pp. 436-438.

83. Struthers, *op. cit.*, p. 438. There is no reference in the *Minutes* of the Relief Synod to the devising of a new Formula.

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

also enacted by the Relief Synod at the time of the McGill and Smith heresies, was merely temporary, and was abrogated a few years thereafter.⁸⁴

However, Struthers' analysis reflects more wishful thinking, one would suspect, than historical or theological fact. In the first place, there is no evidence to suggest that the Synod's attitude to Confessional laxity in the 1790s, and particularly its adopting of a stringent mode to combat possible laxity, was merely an act uncharacteristic of its 'normal', more liberal, attitude to the Confession, as Struthers seems to suggest. In fact, the reverse is the case, as the 1790 overture makes only too clear. The Synod's commitment was to the verbal formulation of the 1711 Act of Assembly!

In the second place, Struthers' claim that the Relief Church considered the 1790 overture a 'temporary' expedient that was 'abrogated a few years thereafter', does not stand. There is no evidence to suggest that the legislation was only a temporary expedient, as a careful examination of the *Minutes* makes clear. The Relief Church took no action towards changing its position on subscription until nearly thirty-five years after the Smith case, years during which the other branches of the Secession were modifying their links with the Confession.

It is clear that the 1823 Formula marks a distinct change in the Relief Church's attachment to the model Formula of 1711. The new Formula patently allowed a degree of laxity hitherto not enjoyed *de jure* in the Church. The very construction of the Formula seemed fitted for those who baulked at subscribing and owning the 'whole doctrine of the Confession', and acknowledging it as the confession of *their own faith*.

7. The Union of 1847

The union of the United Secession Church and the Relief Church in 1847 led to the drafting of a Basis of Union,⁸⁵ and the

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

drafting of a new Formula for ordination. The second article of the Basis and the second question of the revised Formula revealed a definite shift and readjustment in the Secession Church's relation to the Westminster Confession of Faith. C. G. McCrie has, however, maintained that:

When the ... Union of 1847 took place the article in the Basis on Union and the question in the Formula bearing upon the Westminster Standards were in substantial agreement with those of 1820.⁸⁶

Such a judgment fails, however, to accommodate the facts. While it is true to say that there is a measure of agreement between the 1820 and 1847 documents, there is certainly no 'substantial agreement' as McCrie claimed. Article 2 of the Basis of Union confirmed that:

...the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, are the confession and catechism of this Church, and contain the authorised exhibition of the sense in which we understand the Holy Scriptures,⁸⁷

but removed the important phrase – 'and are the confession of our faith'.⁸⁸ A similar readjustment appeared in the second question of the revised Formula. We have seen that the 1820 Formula required candidates to acknowledge the Westminster Standards as the confession of *their* faith. In the revised Formula of 1847, however, candidates were no longer required to identify the Standards with their own personal confession of faith. They were asked:

85. *Proceedings of the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church 1847-1856* (Edinburgh, 1856), pp. 9-10, 64.

86. C. G. McCrie, *Confessions*, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

87. *Proceedings of the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church 1847-1856*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

88. *Ibid.* p. 9.

The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy

Do you acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as an exhibition of the sense in which you understand the Holy Scriptures...?⁸⁹

To suggest then, as McCrie does, that the Basis and Formula of 1847 were substantially the same as the Basis and Formula of 1820, is either to seek continuity where there is none, or to fly in the face of historical fact. This same point was made in the *Watchword Magazine* of January 1870.⁹⁰ After comparing the United Presbyterian Church Formula of 1847 with that of the Free Church of 1846, the magazine concluded that the 1847 Formula allowed a minister for the first time in the history of the Secession the freedom not to own the Westminster Confession as the confession of *his* faith.⁹¹ A. T. Innes was of the opinion that the United Presbyterian Church ‘has wholly abolished the Formula of Subscription...and has substituted... the simple statement, that the Confession and Catechisms are “an exhibition of the sense in which I understand the Holy Scriptures”’.⁹² The central element of the 1711 Formula had finally been eroded. It was this very change which led the more liberally minded George Pearson, as we have already noted, to argue that his Church no longer held the Westminster Standards on the same high level as the other Presbyterian Churches in Scotland.

The Articles and Formula of 1847 did not conclude the new Church’s desire to provide its ministers with some measure of laxity regarding their public and ecclesiastical attachment to the Westminster Standards. The final step was not taken until 1879 when the United Presbyterian Church passed declaratory

89. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

90. The *Watchword* was the organ of the anti-union party in the Free Church during the union talks of the 1860s and early 1870s between that Church and the United Presbyterian Church.

91. *The Watchword Magazine*, IV (Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, 1870), pp. 444-447.

92. Innes, *op. cit.* (1st ed., 1867), pp. 438-439.



The Secession and The Formula of Subscription

legislation aimed at allowing its ministers personal liberty of opinion on matters which did not enter the ‘substance of the faith’.

The 1840s were seminal years in other respects than witnessing the Church’s changing attitude to its Subordinate Standards. From 1841 until 1845, the United Secession Church was embroiled in a theological controversy revolving around the extent of the atonement. In the Divinity Hall, two professors began to teach a scheme of doctrine which seemed to some to undermine the teaching of the Westminster Standards. As we will see, the Atonement Controversy afforded further evidence that the Secession was departing from its historic attachment to the Westminster Standards.

