A Comparison of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Confession of 1967

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The adoption of the Confession of 1967 by the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) was seemingly a watershed moment in American Presbyterianism. The secular media lauded the confession, which was nine years in the making, as “something of a milestone,”\(^1\) and one religious journal declared that the confession “marked the first major change in an official Reformed statement of faith since adoption of the Westminster Confession in 1647.”\(^2\) Many consider the Confession of 1967 deserving of such accolades. After all, it sought to supplant a document that had shaped American Presbyterianism for 320 years. However, was all of this necessary? Could the Confession of 1967 truly replace the Westminster Confession of Faith, which has been called “the most perfect statement of Systematic Theology ever framed by the Christian Church?”\(^3\) The Confession of 1967 was the result of the theology of the twentieth century, much as the Westminster Confession had grown from the Reformed theology of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. While they are both products of the theology of their respective times, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Confession of 1967 have substantial differences. One of the major areas of difference is found in the way the two documents view the inspiration of Scripture.

Before beginning a comparison of the two confessions, it should be noted that the passage of the Confession of 1967 (C67) was not the first attempt by twentieth-century American Presbyterians to alter the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF). The Northern branch of the

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Presbyterian Church added two chapters to the WCF in 1903, and the Southern church did likewise in 1942. The two chapters were entitled “Of the Holy Spirit” and “Of the Gospel of the Love of God and Missions,” since it was felt the WCF lacked “a sufficiently full doctrine of the Holy Spirit” and hampered men by “rigid predestination limits.” This attitude was highlighted by the fact that the Northern church also added in 1903 two declaratory statements, the first of which dealt directly with misgivings on the subject of predestination: “Contrary to the implication that Christ had died only for some, and that others were foreordained to damnation, the Declaratory Statement made clear that Christ’s sacrifice for sin was sufficient for all and offered to all.” The second declaration, which objected to the WCF’s statement that elect infants dying in infancy are saved, added that all infants dying in infancy are saved. In addition to these changes, in the 1950’s both the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches amended the WCF’s prohibition on divorce and remarriage (except in cases of adultery or desertion), preferring to allow greater flexibility in this area. As with the other additions and modifications, the reasons for change were not because the Westminster Divines were ignorant of any particular doctrine, but rather because “great resources in Scripture and in experience [were not] brought to play.” Exactly what these great resources were is uncertain, because no one can accurately accuse the Divines of not being dependant on Scripture when writing the WCF. However, the mention of experience sharing a sort of equal footing with Scripture is troubling, and it hints at the problems that resulted in the decision to write a new confession. This attempt to downplay

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4 Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Confessions: Study Edition (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996), 170. It should be noted that the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church has also added these two chapters to its Confession of Faith.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Dowey, 230.
the sufficiency of Scripture would be a major factor in leading the Northern church to write the C67.

Another consideration in understanding the factors that led to the composition of the C67 is the rise of the theological development of the 20th century known as Neo-orthodoxy. Based on the teachings of Swiss theologian Karl Barth, this system “stems more than anything else from the profound sense of the otherness of God,” who “is immeasurably beyond human beings and has nothing in common with them.”\(^\text{10}\) One of the consequences of this view of God’s transcendence is found in Barth’s view of revelation. For Barth, “revelation comes exclusively through Christ, the Word of God. It is mediated through the Bible and the teaching of the church.”\(^\text{11}\) Thus, it is surmised that “human language cannot be used to speak truly about God; God is simply too great for human language.”\(^\text{12}\) Such concepts rarely exist in isolation. Barth’s conclusions were further developed by theologians like Rudolf Bultmann, such that they “carried neoorthodoxy’s [sic] epistemological implications to their logical conclusions by denying, through its program of ‘demythologizing’ the Jesus of the New Testament, the very possibility of discovering any historical facts about him.”\(^\text{13}\) As a result Neo-orthodoxy tends to hold to an understanding of biblical revelation that is very different from the traditional Reformed view of Scripture that preceded it:

The neoorthodox [sic] theologians … subscribe to the … Bible as the “Word of God.” This does not mean that they take the Bible literally; they agree with the liberals in accepting the principles of literary and historical criticism of the Bible. Myths like the creation stories are considered symbolic ways of stating truths that cannot be presented in their fullness with rational consistency. These theologians speak of the “Words behind


\(^{11}\) Ibid., 269; cf. Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 246-7. Hill adds that according to Barth, the Bible and the teaching of the church may also be called the Word of God, but only “in a secondary sense.”


\(^{13}\) Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 16. This denial of the historical nature of Scripture would eventually extend, of course, beyond the pages of the NT.
the Words” and insist that God is found in special events and in His relationship with men. The Bible merely reports these happenings, and the accounts are subject to the errors of human reporting and transmission.\(^{14}\)

Hence, the view among many Neo-orthodox theologians is that “revelation does not disclose supernatural knowledge.”\(^{15}\) A denial of inerrancy with regard to the Scriptures is especially troubling when considering Neo-orthodoxy. It is difficult to see, even if one affirms a “high view” of inspiration through a Barthian rubric, how a subsequently low view of the Bible cannot inevitably follow.

There can be little doubt that a high view of the Scriptures was a primary concern of the Westminster Divines. In fact, the WCF begins with a chapter entitled “Of the Holy Scripture.”\(^{16}\) For the Divines, Scripture was the foundation, the starting point from which all other doctrines found in the WCF were to be derived. This was due in part to the fact that the members of the Westminster Assembly were bound by Parliament to base every statement in the WCF on the Bible, a rule which they would have necessarily been obliged to observed because of their Puritan background.\(^{17}\) Because of their beliefs, the Divines held the Bible itself to be the inspired Word of God, and it was on this presupposition that the WCF was built. According to Leith, “there is no question that the authors of the Confession believed that the Bible was inspired and

\(^{14}\) Harold H. Titus, *Living Issues in Philosophy*, 4\(^{th}\) ed. (New York: American Book Company, 1964), 423. In demonstrating this tendency among Neo-orthodox theologians, it should be noted that at least one contemporary of Barth claims the Swiss theologian never “denied the validity of the established results of historical-critical research. . . . He dared to take thoroughly in earnest the voices of the biblical witnesses, and indeed to the very last letter.” See James D. Smart, trans., *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence 1914-1925* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), 21. Hill points out that Barth actually seemed largely uninterested with questions about history. See Hill, 275, 282.

\(^{15}\) Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 5. Although sometimes sympathetic to the theological contributions of Barth, Grenz recognizes the inherent danger of the subjective nature of Neo-orthodoxy, asking the following question: “Might we not be tempted to make the inspiration of the Bible dependent upon our hearing the voice of the Spirit in its pages, losing thereby the objective reality of inspiration in a manner reminiscent of the older neoorthodoxy [sic]?” See Grenz, 387-8.


that God revealed himself in propositions. In fact, no one with whom the Assembly dealt seriously denied the inspiration of the Bible.”18 When the WCF declares the Scriptures are “given by inspiration of God, to be the rule and faith of life” and have been “kept pure in all ages [by God’s care and providence],”19 there can be little doubt as to the emphasis placed upon the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. Warfield states it is an “obvious fact that the Westminster Confession teaches the verbal inspiration and infallibility or inerrancy of the original Scriptures.”20 Hence, “the Confession affirms the providential preservation of the inspired Scriptures in purity in the originals, and the adequate purity of the Word of God in translations.”21 In addition, “inspiration is asserted to be pervasive, to belong to all the books enumerated without exception, and to all their parts and elements without discrimination….22 Because the Scriptures were seen as the true and pure Word of God, they were perceived to be absolutely authoritative, and this proved to be foundational for the entire WCF.

The view of the supremacy of Scripture in the WCF is not shared by the C67. While the WCF was not accepted by Parliament until Scriptural proof texts were provided for each article, C67 does not, as a rule, cite Scripture. According to Edward A. Dowey, Jr., C67 does not quote Biblical passages “on principal.”23 Not only does C67 not quote Biblical passages, it never explicitly mentions the inspiration of the Scriptures – a move that is quite deliberate.24 Instead, C67 refers to the Scriptures as “the words of men.”25 This conviction was implicit on the part of Dowey, who, as chairman of the committee responsible for composing C67, had a greater

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18 Ibid., 76-77.
19 WCF, 195-6.
21 Ibid., 237.
22 Ibid., 202-3.
23 Dowey, 41.
influence than any other committee member on the document.\textsuperscript{26} For example, when commenting on the subject of sin in the confession, Dowey states:

There is no mention of Adam, Eve, and the serpent in the Confession of 1967. While the story of the Fall will not cease to reveal the nature of sin, it can no longer be taken as a literal account of sin’s origin. It is set in views of life, history, and the cosmos that in the providence of God have become antiquated by the advancement of human learning.\textsuperscript{27}

James D. Smart, who also served on the committee that wrote C67, believes that the teachings of the WCF on inerrancy and inspiration have “made it possible in the past for men to torture the faith of their fellow Christians with the demand that they accept as fact whatever is reported anywhere in Scripture, that the world was created in six days, that Elisha made the axe-head float, that Jonah was swallowed by the whale.”\textsuperscript{28} Dowey claims that a correct view of Scripture should not be based on inspiration as in the WCF, “but on revelation, not on how the books were written, but how they continue to communicate the message of salvation.”\textsuperscript{29} These comments, of course, speak volumes as to the views and presuppositions of the committee. As George M. Landes comments, “It is striking that [C67] has no discrete statement in which the authority of the Bible is specifically and directly mentioned.”\textsuperscript{30} Actually, it is not striking when one considers the words of Jack B. Rogers, who declares that the doctrines of inerrancy and inspiration were actually faults of the Westminster Assembly.\textsuperscript{31} Rogers attempts to argue that the Divines had departed from the teachings of the sixteenth century Reformers, and he even goes as far as

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\item \textsuperscript{27} Dowey, 61. Emphasis added.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Smart, “Scripture and the Confession of 1967,” 38.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 101.
\end{itemize}
virtually equating Neo-orthodoxy with John Calvin’s view of Scripture. The effects of Neo-orthodoxy on C67 are clear. Instead of declaring Scripture to be the Word of God, only Christ is referred to in this way. Landes states:

[This] indicates that the Scriptures are not God’s word in the same sense Jesus Christ is … because these human words are the Spirit’s instrument for interpreting the Christ event to humanity…. [Thus] we are able to interpret the same scriptural words in fresh and differing ways, depending upon our new historical situation and concerns.

This view of Scripture may be the most glaring difference between the two confessions, and it represents a shocking departure from the beliefs of the Westminster Assembly.

Is C67 correct in reserving the phrase “Word of God” for Christ alone? Of course, Jesus Christ is the Word of God Incarnate. On that point there can be no doubt, and the Divines would have been quick to agree. The central issue (at least on this question) is not with Christ, but with the Scriptures. This is the one issue in which C67 admits it is making a change. Presumably, this is because of a disagreement with the WCF on the issue, but, as Gerstner points out, this view was not unique to the Westminster Assembly; nearly every creed or confession in Christendom either states or implies the doctrine of inspiration. Instead, it is C67 that is turning new ground, since “never before has a church spoken of the Bible without bearing witness to its Inspiration.” The Bible is not, as Rogers claims, “a fallible, but adequate witness to the one revelation of God, Jesus Christ.”

33 Landes, 75.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
the validity of Scripture. The Scriptures are true and reliable, and as such testify to the truth of Jesus Christ as the Word of God. Gerstner rightly asserts it is preposterous to think the Divines did not believe this: “Do [the supporters of C67] suppose for one moment that our fathers in the faith thought that the Bible as the Word of God had any other pre-eminent and primary meaning than Jesus Christ?”38 Perhaps all the discussion about the phrase “Word of God” in C67 misses the point entirely. Edmund P. Clowney rightly states “the issue is not whether a seventeenth century view of the Scriptures can be maintained in the church today. The issue is whether the Lord’s view of the Scriptures can be maintained.”39 It would be interesting to see how the supporters of C67 would deal specifically with Christ’s view of the Scriptures. That, however, may be too much to ask, because it is entirely possible that the Christ mentioned in C67 is different from the true Christ revealed in Scripture. Cornelius Van Til makes this point when he writes, concerning the theology behind C67, “The God and Christ of this contemporary theology have very little in common with the God and the Christ of historic Christianity. There is good reason to believe that the new theology has virtually manufactured a new Christ, a person who is essentially different from the Savior of the Scriptures.”40 It is this “new” theology, rooted in Neo-orthodoxy, which is at the heart of C67. The Christ spoken of is not Jesus of Nazareth, God Incarnate, but the Jesus of the “Christ event,” subjectively revealed when one reads the Scriptures.

In comparing the two documents, it would seem they are irreconcilable when it comes to the doctrine of Scripture. When one document attributes the words of the Bible to God and the other merely calls them the words of men, the diametrically opposed presuppositions of those on

38 Gerstner, 12.
the composing committees become apparent. The PC(USA) still has C67 in its *Book of Confessions*, alongside the WCF. How can these two documents, so different in their positions on Scripture, peacefully coexist? Such is not without the consequences of a fractured denominational life. The official website of the PCUSA makes this statement:

> The great strength of Presbyterianism is its uncanny knack of fostering a fellowship in which people of different viewpoints continue to dialogue. *Not only in the same denomination but also in the same congregation* it is often possible to find folks who believe every word of the Bible to be factual worshiping alongside sisters and brothers in Christ who treat the Bible as true in meaning but not necessarily factual, and still others who would not even agree that the Bible is wholly true in meaning, let alone factual. *None of these viewpoints contradicts our Presbyterian Constitution*. The church is charged with giving full expression to the rich diversity within its membership. Our Constitution requires us to promote inclusiveness, which means including all the different theological positions *that are consistent with the Reformed tradition*.41

It is submitted to the reader that the theological position of C67 on Scripture is in accord with neither the Reformed tradition nor historic Presbyterianism, unless one wishes to gut those phrases of their meanings. Such an official position by the PC(USA) does not lead to peace and unity but discord, particularly with regard to that which should be its foundational document: the Bible. The website also states:

> What do Presbyterians believe about the Bible? We believe that through it God speaks to us – that it is inspired. For some, that means the Bible is inerrant. For others, it means that even though the Bible is culturally conditioned and not necessarily factual or even always true, it breathes with the life of God.42

How can darkness and light have fellowship in this matter? In an age in which those who would call the very word of God into question and take refuge in the word “inspired” (which, very clearly, can be taken to mean something quite different from “inerrant,” even to the point of suggesting it is “culturally conditioned and not necessarily factual or even always true”), a

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42 Ibid.
document such as C67 should serve as a warning to those denominations which wish to be a part of the historic Reformed tradition. The word of God cannot be reduced to the mere words of men, for if it is, there is no trustworthy standard, only the subjective musings of sinful human beings, destined to change along with the new winds blown by every emerging generation that seeks to live apart from the written revelation of God.