

## Subscribing to the Heart of Westminster

**By John Barber**

Do we as ministers embrace the heart of Westminster? In other words, are we true reformers?

In his address to the 29th General Assembly of the PCA, Dr. Bryan Chapell spoke, among other things, on authorial intent of the Confession and how it serves to support the “good faith” subscription view. “We first have a responsibility to discover what the authors of our Confession meant to convey.” The drafter’s intent, according to Chapell, was first “To say what the Scriptures say (WLC #3; WCF 1.10).” Whether one is for strict, good faith, or some other model of subscription, we should all agree that the Westminster Divines set out to say in the Confession what the Scriptures say.

But what do the Scriptures say? The Scriptures say many things, but their essential message is the “good news” of Jesus Christ. Using diverse literary genres, all Scripture declares the Christocentric *evangelion* of God, which William Tyndale notes, “Signifieth good, merry, glad and joyful tidings, that maketh a man’s heart glad, and maketh him sing, dance, and leap for joy” (*Doctrinal Treatises*, Cambridge: Parker Society, 1848, p. 8). Notice that Tyndale’s definition of the gospel does not emphasize its doctrinal side, but rather the joyful encounter between the messenger of God and the one who hears and receives the message. The emphasis is clearly not on right belief (orthodoxy), but right practice (orthopraxy). Indeed, this stress is found throughout Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, God’s appointed spokesmen declare the glad hosannas of God’s salvation to individuals and nations, whereby those that receive it, dance, sing, and leap for joy in its presence. This is what the Scriptures say.

But there is more. Notice also the extent to which the experience of joy is part of the gospel encounter. A joyful messenger brings a joyful message to those who receive it with joy. Joy appears to be a catalyst in a nonstop cycle of evangelism and missions. What is the source of this joy? It comes directly from the Father. Our joy in the gospel is a picture of the joy that results in heaven over the salvation of even one lost sinner, and which flows from the heart of the Father for his elect children returned home.

But our joy is more than a picture of his joy. In the new birth those dead in trespasses and sins are given a new heart, God’s heart. With God’s heart and the Holy Spirit within us, we now have God’s joy. It is not too much to say that our joy in salvation is the Father’s joy expressing itself through us and back to himself, whereby he receives all the praise, honor, and glory. This new life is nothing less than Christ within us, the hope of glory. Soon we find that our joy cannot remain with us. We sense it helping to move us from the role of the

convert to that of the joyful messenger. Now we are the ones singing the good news to even more people for whom Christ died. The joyful cycle starts afresh.

The emphasis in *evangelion* upon the continuing cycle of joy leading to evangelism and to joy again does not suggest that experience outweighs hard theology. But it does mean that right belief always incorporates right practice. In terms of belief in the gospel, the typical scriptural pattern is that of a joyful convert gladly becoming a vehicle himself for God's message. Why? Again it is because the newborn child of God has discovered he has God's heart. And God's heart is for the lost. This is the inescapable truth of Christian living that the meaning of *evangelion* so aptly stresses. This is what the Scriptures say.

What do these facts have to do with confessional subscription? If we are agreed that the Confession truly says what the Scriptures say, and the Scriptures say that God's heart is for the lost, then is not the man who claims to subscribe to the Confession also affirming a burning passion for souls?

It has been suggested that strict subscription by our ministers to Reformed confessional standards is necessary to protect the peace and purity of the Church. I do not debate this point, but feel compelled to point out that a man could meticulously subscribe to the *letter* of the Confession, without embracing its *spirit or heart*. But the heart of the Confession, following Scripture, is God's heart. And God's heart is for his elect, many of whom still wander in spiritual darkness. Unless our ministries are marked by the same commitment John Knox, C.H. Spurgeon, George Whitefield, and the notable Jonathan Edwards demonstrated in reaching the lost with the gospel any claim to subscription rings hollow.

One might argue that seeking to know if a man adopts the Confession is not the same thing as ascertaining his heart-felt compassion for the lot of fallen humanity. After all, we are only interested to know if he *thinks* God's thoughts after him. While there is a sense in which this argument is valid, distinguishing theology as God thinks it and theology as we live is not quite so simple.

Central to historic Protestantism is the belief that we encounter God in the reading of Scripture. What we encounter is not just what he thinks, but him – the way he feels and acts. Despite the fact that every word of Scripture provides for this experience, Scripture often goes out of its way to impress us with how God thinks and acts by employing a variety a means, including anthropomorphisms. It was Cornelius Van Til who, following the 17th century reformers, asserted that God's self-disclosure in Scripture represents an area of theology that is distinct from what he thinks in himself (*theologia archetypa*) and is best described as Pilgrim theology (*theologia viatorum*).

As the name implies, Pilgrim theology indicates that the believer's interaction with Scripture can never be an abstract intellectual exercise, as the nature of the

interaction itself is an experience along the road of Christian progress. Thus, when a man says that he fully adopts the Confession, which only says what the Scriptures say, I want to assume that he is a “pilgrim” who has encountered the living God in His Word and who, as a result, has come away with His heart for the lost. But sadly, this is not always the case.

I do pray that many Reformed ministers would regain the passion for the souls of men as they had in the past, but I fear they are too busy seeking to win the argument of the day and condemn the rest if they won't concede defeat. I know that sounds severe, but I fear too often it is true. Many are more interested in winning the debate rather than winning men to Christ. But winning men to Christ is essentially what the Confession is all about, that is, if it says what the Scriptures say. If, however, the Confession does not ultimately stand for the souls of men, then it does not say what the Scriptures say and is not worthy of our slightest affirmation.

Today our fellowship is becoming increasingly divided over the issue of subscription. And I am distressed over this emerging polarity. In listening to different sides of the debate the quiet inference is that either you are a Pharisee or a heretic. But if the Confession says what the Scriptures say, this polarity is not of the nature of the document, but comes from forces that war within us. As I have previously stated, built into the Confession, and all orthodox Christian doctrine, is an indissoluble link to God's heart for the lost. One cannot claim doctrinal fidelity to our standards without also joyfully embracing God's supernatural love for the souls of men.

How can we resolve our tensions? We can seek that our candidates for the gospel ministry vow 100 percent epistemological concurrence to the Confession, but this will not help. Our tension shall only move from the nature and necessity of confessional subscription to whose interpretation of the “light of nature” is grammatically and historically accurate. We will be like the snake eating its tail. On the other hand, we can resolve that a form of system subscription is the best and most prudent way to go.

But perhaps there is another question begging for our attention that if resolved may help get us beyond loggerheads. Do we as ministers embrace the heart of Westminster? In other words, are we true reformers? Today you may need to ask God to revive within you what was once a burning passion for souls. Don't worry. We all come to that place. But what is so encouraging is that God always hears and answers our prayers. I know, because this too is what the Scriptures say.