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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.



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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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).

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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.*