

GOSPEL HIGHWAY

< www.ghmag.net >

The Subscription Debate And Its Relevance Today

by B. S. Poh

Standing by itself, the title of this article means nothing to a lot of people. I suspect that after being told it has something to do with the Confession of Faith, many will still be in the dark as to what the topic is all about. This is the case even among Reformed Christians who hold to a Confession of Faith. Although the Subscription Debate is not widely known, it is nevertheless an important issue. This is so because, if it is not settled, it will sooner or later affect the peace and unity of a church, and of any grouping of Reformed churches. The events and circumstances surrounding the spread of the Reformed faith in recent years indicate that the issue is alive and affecting the people concerned, without it being recognised as such. I believe that this issue will be pressed upon us more and more in the days ahead, and we do well to be familiar with it.

From the outset, it needs to be noted that the Subscription Debate concerns the confessional Christians and churches. It is not the concern of Christians and churches that are non-confessional.

Here, I will address the issue in three parts. In the first part, I will give some definitions. In the second part, I will provide a sketch of the Debate. In the third and last part, I will discuss the relevance of the debate to us today.

I. Definitions

The first question we will try to answer is, What is the Subscription Debate? The Subscription Debate is a controversy in Presbyterian circles concerning the degree and extent of commitment to the doctrinal standards of the church. The controversy began in Britain in the 17th century, spread to North America in the 18th century, and resurfaced in the 19th century. At the end of the twentieth century, it surfaced yet again, and agitated the Presbyterian churches. Although the issue appeared academic, it had direct practical implications - affecting the ordination of ministers, church membership, and the fellowship between otherwise like-minded churches. The controversy polarised around two views of subscription to the doctrinal standards of the church, namely the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Shorter Catechism, and the Larger Catechism.

What is subscription to a doctrinal standard? What does it mean when someone says that he subscribes to a confession of faith? It means that he believes in the doctrines set forth in that confession of faith. It means that he is committed personally to those doctrines. Straightway, two questions arise. What degree of commitment does he have to those doctrines? And what extent of the doctrine of that confession of faith does he commit himself to? He may mean that his commitment is to all the doctrines of the confession, or to 80 percent of the doctrine, or to the main doctrines contained in it. If he means the main doctrines of the confession of faith, another question will arise, namely, which constitute the main doctrines? We will leave this last question for later. For the moment, we will concentrate on the degree of commitment and the extent of doctrine that is committed to.

Normally, a Presbyterian minister makes two vows at his ordination. The first ordination vow reads, "Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as originally given, to be the inerrant word of God, the infallible rule of faith and practice?" Other Reformed churches will have a similar, if not exactly the same, vow. There is no room for any loose subscription here. Anyone who cannot take this vow with a clear conscience, sincerely, and wholeheartedly, is not fit to be the pastor of

a Reformed church.

The second ordination vow of the Presbyterian minister reads, in part, “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of this church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures;...” It is here that differences arise. **Strict or full subscription** requires that he takes at face value the second ordination vow. The vow requires the adoption of the Confession of Faith and Catechisms, no more and no less, believing that they contain the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures.

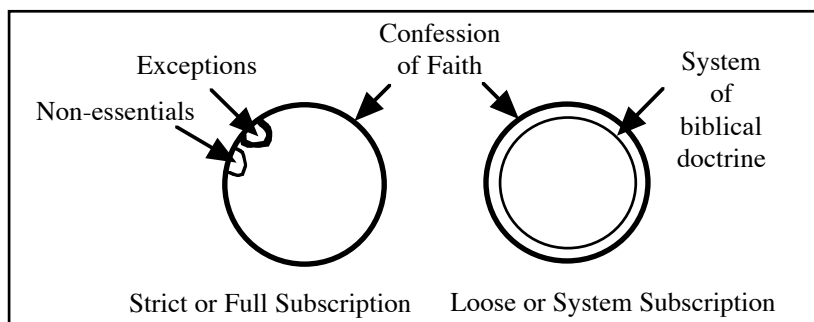
Before proceeding further, let us note some things that strict or full subscription does not mean. First, it does not insist that all of the teachings of the Confession and Catechisms are of equal importance, just as not all the teachings in the Bible are of equal importance. The full subscriptionist recognises that some doctrines are fundamental compared to others. Second, full subscription does not require the adoption of every word of the Confession and Catechisms. Instead, it requires the adoption of every doctrine or teaching of the Confession and Catechisms. Third, full subscription does not mean placing the Confession and Catechisms on the same level as the Bible. Instead, the Confession and Catechisms are made the doctrinal standards of the church because what they say is true to the Bible.

The second view is known as **loose or system subscription**. It maintains that we subscribe to a system of doctrine which is not specifically defined, but which is contained in the Confession and Catechisms of the church. The loose subscriptionist maintains that only the doctrines comprising the system are covered in the words of the second ordination vow. Doctrines that are not part of the system are not included. It is left to the courts of the church, as occasion arises, to define which doctrines are essential parts of the system of doctrine. This means that the system has not been settled

We see now the contrast between the two views. The Full Subscription position holds that we subscribe to the Confession and Catechisms because they contain the doctrines of the Bible, whereas the Loose Subscription position holds that we subscribe only in so far as these documents contain doctrines of the Bible. It would seem that the loose subscriptionist is trying to avoid the danger of elevating the uninspired Confession and Catechisms to the level of the Bible - a danger which the full subscriptionist strenuously avoids, and has never been guilty of. The loose subscriptionist fails to see that, noble though his intention may be, his position leaves open the possibility of other men abusing it, which in fact has happened in history. The Loose Subscription position does not fix the boundary of the system of doctrine contained in the doctrinal standards, allowing for its proponent to regard certain doctrines as not essential to the system, and therefore not requiring his commitment to them. The degree of his commitment to the doctrinal standards of the church becomes relative. This is not the case with the Full Subscription position, which requires full commitment to all the doctrines set forth in the doctrinal standards of the church.

There is, in fact, a third position, which identifies the Confession of Faith with the teaching of the Bible. This rigid position virtually places the Confession of Faith on the same level with the Bible - both are of equal authority. Our interest here is not with this position, but with the two mentioned earlier.

As I understand it, we may represent the two positions by the diagram below:



In the Strict or Full Subscription position, we have the circle which represents the Confession of Faith - and, to the Presbyterian Church, it includes the two Catechisms. The Confession is regarded as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Bible. We shall say something about the "exceptions" and the "non-essentials" later. At this point, we need only to take note of the main difference between the Full and the Loose Subscription positions.

In the Loose Subscription position, there is a circle representing the Confession of Faith. The loose subscriptionist does not hold to the Confession of Faith as containing the system of doctrine of the Bible. Instead, he holds to the system of doctrine which he believes to be biblical, as contained in the Confession of Faith. To the loose subscriptionist, therefore, the boundary of the system he believes to be biblical is not fixed.

It needs to be noted that the doctrine of many loose subscriptionists actually coincides with that of the full subscriptionists. However, since the Loose Subscription position has no fixed boundary for the biblical doctrine, it opens itself to other men who may say that they hold to the system of doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith, but leave out too much of what is contained in the Confession of Faith.

We should now be clear as to what is the Subscription Debate, what it means to subscribe to the doctrinal standards of the church, what the Full and Loose Subscription positions believe in, respectively, and the issue that is at stake in the debate. We shall now proceed to give a brief sketch of the history of the debate, so that the practical implications are fully appreciated.

II. A sketch of the controversy

The controversy began in Britain. The Westminster Assembly, called by Parliament to draw up the doctrinal standards for the churches in Britain, was divided over the issue of subscription. The Assembly did not settle the issue, but left this to Parliament. In Scotland, the General Assembly adopted the Westminster Confession in 1645. The Presbytery in Ulster, Northern Ireland, followed suit and also adopted it.

Required subscription to the Confession and Catechisms was not enacted in Scotland until 1690. It was further strengthened by a series of enactment between 1690 and 1700. We do not agree that the state should enact on matters pertaining to the doctrine of the church, but the fact was that the Church of Scotland was now placed in the position to enforce the requirement of full subscription to its doctrinal standards. The church, however, did not enforce it. Instead, liberal and heretical professors were tolerated in its fold so that their influence became pervasive. This led to the Secession of 1733.

In Ireland, particularly Northern Ireland, full subscription to the Westminster Standards began in 1697. As in Scotland, this was not strictly enforced. Eventually the church in Ireland was rocked by the subscription controversy, in which the issue was whether subscription was right or wrong. The church became divided between the Subscribers and the Non-subscribers. The Presbyterians around Belfast, with English and not Scottish roots, were generally non-subscribers. They were so lax as to say that the deity of Christ was not necessary. One's conscience and not the Bible or any confessional statement was to be the rule of life and practice. This led to the expulsion of the non-subscribing churches in 1726. By that time, the damage had been done. Around that time a great many of the Scotch-Irish emigrated to America, who became a predominant force in the Presbyterian Church in America.

We now shift our attention to America. The first Presbyterian Church was established in America in 1706. In 1729, a full synod was called in which the Adopting Act was passed, which required full subscription to the Westminster Standards. The Adopting Act required full subscription to the Confession and Catechisms, except for some clauses of the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, concerning the power of the civil magistrate over synods, and power to prosecute any for their religion. The exception clause was to lead to further debate on what the allowance of an exception means, which is of relevance to us today. In the years following, the issue of whether it was permissible for a full subscriptionist to express his scruples over non-fundamental matters was raised. The concept of

stating scruples is also relevant to us today. These we shall discuss later.

Let us come back to our sketch of the debate in America. We are now moving into the 19th century. In 1801, the Presbyterian Church and the Congregational Churches of Connecticut merged under a Plan of Union. The Plan allowed for individuals to be seated in the Congregations, Presbyteries, Synods, and General Assembly without the requirement of subscription. When the demand was made for subscription, the question of what was involved was raised. A school of "loose" subscriptionists arose, who argued that all that was being accepted was the system of doctrine, not the Confession and Catechisms themselves, as containing that system taught in the Scriptures. This in effect, nullified subscription to the Standards, since this so-called "system of doctrine" was not defined. The conflict between the Old School Presbyterians and the New School Presbyterians came to its climax when the Old School party took firm control of the Assembly in 1837, and cut off all congregations, presbyteries, and synods that had been formed on the basis of the Plan of Union. It has generally been held that the New School Church, with its loose subscription, led to the introduction of liberalism into the Presbyterian Church.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the debate resurfaced, this time touching the ordination vow of the minister. The issue involved in the debate is clearly set forth in the book, "The Subscription Debate", by Morton H. Smith, from which the historical material of this talk is taken. The issue included the questions: Is it required of the minister to be a full subscriptionist? If so, is any scruples over non-essential doctrines allowed? If allowed, how do we handle them?

Our sketch of the history of the Subscription Debate must end here, brief though it has been. One obvious point from this sketch is that the Debate had such serious practical implications - affecting the unity and peace of the church, the communion of churches, the admission of members of the church, and the appointment of ministers.

We shall now consider the relevance of the Debate to us.

III. Relevance

The biblical basis

From all that has been said thus far, you would have gathered that I am a full subscriptionist, who is advocating the full subscription position. I believe that it is essential for every serious Christian to subscribe fully to the confession of faith of his church. Speaking from the perspective of a Reformed Baptist, I would not insist on including the catechism in the doctrinal standard of the church, although we value highly, and do make much use of, the catechism. The 1689 Confession of Faith is sufficiently comprehensive to clearly define the biblical system of truth. Each church will have to decide on its own doctrinal standard.

What is the biblical basis for holding to the full subscription position? I would say that the arguments I gave to prove the legitimacy of using the confession of faith, based on I Timothy 3:15 and Jude 3, are equally applicable in providing the biblical basis for the full subscription position. Let me summarise the arguments here. The church is "the pillar and ground of the truth". It is required of us "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints". From these, we may draw out the following implications: it is the duty of the church to know and define the truth; it is the duty of the church to propagate the truth; it is the duty of the church to remain faithful; it is the duty of the church to defend the faith; it is the duty of the church to pass down the faith. We need to notice that the assumption of a definite and definable system of truth has been made, without which those duties of the church will become meaningless. Is it not meaningless for us to have a duty to know and define the truth when the truth cannot be clearly defined? Is it not meaningless to defend the faith when that faith cannot be clearly defined? Is it not meaningless to pass down the faith when that faith cannot be clearly stated?

We may garner further biblical arguments in support of the full subscription position. In Acts 20:27 the apostle Paul says, "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God."

Note that it is the whole counsel of God, not a partial counsel of God, that has been declared. Our subscription is to the confession of faith as a whole, which we believe contains the system of truth taught in the Bible, and not to some vague system of truth that is less than what is taught in the confession.

In 2 Timothy 1:13 the same apostle says, “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” Then, in 2 Timothy 2:2 he says, “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” The expression, “the pattern of sound words” speaks of a definite body of truth, which has to be passed down to the future generations. This is in keeping with Jude 3, which we have already referred to: “...contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints”. Jude’s readers knew what he meant by “the faith”. This cannot be a reference to the subjective faith of the Christian, because the definite article is attached to the word “faith”. Furthermore, a subjective faith can hardly be passed down without the presence of an objective body of truth called “the faith”.

Exceptions

I trust what has been said is sufficient to convince you that the Full Subscription position is right. Now, we need to say something about the scruples of some full subscriptionists to certain articles in the Confession of Faith that may be regarded as not necessary or essential to the position of Full Subscription. We have noted earlier that full subscription does not mean that all of the teachings of the Confession are of equal importance. Furthermore, full subscription does not require the adoption of every word of the Confession. Instead, it requires the adoption of every doctrine or teaching of the Confession.

We consider first the case of a church consciously making exceptions of certain articles in the Confession of Faith. Presbyterians in many parts of the world have omitted certain articles in chapters 20 and 23 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, concerning the power of the civil magistrate, as necessary and essential to full subscription. Among the Reformed Baptists, the articles in the 1689 Confession of Faith that may be regarded as not necessary or essential to full subscription include the following:

(i) Equating the pope as “that antichrist, that man of sin, and that son of perdition, who exalts himself in the church against Christ and all that is called God, who the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of His coming” (26:4). From exegetical ground, many Reformed Baptists are not prepared to identify the pope as the particular antichrist of the end time. Instead, they look upon the pope, and the papal system, as one of the forerunners of the antichrist, who is yet to be revealed.

(ii) “Infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who works when, where, and how He pleases” (10:3). Not all Reformed Baptists believe that all infants dying in infancy are saved. Instead, many believe that only those who are elect among the infants who die in infancy are saved. (When the Confession was first issued in 1677, the word “elect” was placed before “infants” so that the sentence reads, “Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved...” The sentence and its meaning parallel the next sentence, which reads, “So also are all elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.”)

(iii) The ordination of elders to be done “by fasting and prayer, with the laying on of the hands of the eldership of the church (if there be any previously appointed elder or elders)”. And the ordination of deacons to be done “by prayer, with the laying on of hands” (26:9). Some churches omit fasting and the laying of hands in these ordinations.

(iv) The necessity of churches to be united into regional associations so that when there are disputes the “many churches holding communion together do, through their appointed messengers meet to consider, and give their advice about the matter in dispute, and to report to all the churches concerned” (26:15). Quite many confessional Reformed Baptist churches do not believe in the formal association of churches, and interpret this section as referring to churches in loose fellowship with one another

and meeting together to settle disputes as and when necessary. The language of this section, however, quite obviously refers to the formal association of churches. Moreover, the Confession of Faith was issued by the Particular Baptists of the seventeenth century who practised the regional association of churches.

Except for the above four articles, I doubt that there are serious confessional Reformed Baptists who would treat other articles in the 1689 as not necessary or essential to full subscription. It is the prerogative of the individual church to decide which of these articles are not necessary or essential. In our own church, and all the churches that we have planted, under God, only the first of these is treated as not necessary and not essential. We therefore declare in our Church Constitution our adherence to the 1689, with this clause excepted.

It has been mooted in certain Reformed Baptist circles that a revision of the 1689 Confession should be made, including fairly major amendments to articles other than those mentioned earlier, e.g. those that concern the covenants and the form of church government. Some of you would be aware that in recent years there has been a controversy among Reformed Baptists over the doctrine of the church eldership and the manner of exercising rule. The proposed amendments on these issues are significant enough to alter the character of the original Confession of Faith. We are not talking about making exceptions to certain articles in the Confession. We are talking about making amendments to the Confession. I am not totally opposed to the idea of making such amendments, for I do not believe that the Confession is sacrosanct or perfect. However, such an amended Confession, if ever it is produced, should be called by a totally different name instead of retaining its original name or a semblance of it. This is to avoid confusion, and to be fair to the majority of other Reformed Baptist churches that are content to use the original Confession. When the Calvinistic Baptists in America made some minor amendments to the 1689 Confession in 1744, they called it by a totally different name, namely "The Philadelphia Confession of Faith".

To help us crystallise what we have learned thus far, let us look at the diagram again. We have seen that the Loose Subscription position holds to a system of doctrine which is believed to be biblical, which is contained in the Confession of Faith. This position is open to the possibility of someone saying, "I believe in the system of teaching taught in the Confession of Faith", when he actually believes less than, or differently from, what we believe to be contained in the Confession of Faith.

In the Full Subscription position, we say that we subscribe to the Confession of Faith as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Bible. We are not saying that we hold to all the wordings of the Confession, nor that all the doctrines of the Bible are equally important. Along the way, there are certain exceptions which we make, and we declare what they are. That way, other people will know that we hold to the Confession of Faith, with these exceptions.

Furthermore, we allow for the possibility that there may be those who are of our position - who are full subscriptionists - who may hold to more, or less, exceptions. We allow for the fact that they may have certain scruples over what may be called the non-essentials. The non-essentials, of course, are not fixed. It is up to the individual church to determine what constitute the non-essentials. This is so different from the Loose Subscription position.

Implications

Let us now consider how full subscriptionism impinges on church membership, the fellowship between churches, and the appointment of pastors. We begin with church membership. A church that holds to full subscription of the Confession will require its members to be full subscriptionists. This position is contrary to popular opinion today, for the non-confessional churches will only make salvation the only criterion of membership. Confessional churches believe that each church has a right, and a duty, to define the system of truth it believes to be biblical. This must not be understood to mean that we require every prospective member to be a theologian - knowing all the intricacies involved in every doctrine contained in the Confession. If we do so, we can rightly be charged with going beyond the requirement of the Scriptures for membership. We are fully aware that most new Christians do not know all the doctrines in depth. However, that is different from saying that they do not need to know

and accept all the doctrines of the Confession. A new believer has known enough of the truth to be converted. Being genuinely regenerate, there will be a desire and willingness to learn more. In seeking to join the membership of the church, he should subscribe to the Confession, even though his understanding of the doctrines in the Confession may be very rudimentary. In fact, it will be beneficial to the church - for its peace, unity, and stability - to require the prospective member to attend a membership class in which the Confession is taught.

What happens if the member in due course grows in understanding and begins to have scruples over certain articles of the Confession? Is it required of him to resign from the membership? The answer will depend on whether the articles he has scruples over are regarded by the church as essential and necessary. The eldership of the church bears the responsibility of leading the church to a clear stand. The matter scrupled over must not be such as to overthrow the distinctives, or fundamentals, of that particular church - in its doctrine, worship, and government. For example, a Baptist church differs from a Presbyterian church on baptism. This difference should not be regarded as so serious as to prevent fellowship between the two churches. However, the warrant of existence of these churches as Baptist or Presbyterian lies in this difference, apart from other things. It is the right of a Reformed Baptist church to require adherence to believer's baptism - in belief and practice - as a criterion of membership. In other words, the issue of believer's baptism is a non-negotiable. It is essential and necessary to full subscription of its Confession. The member whose conviction on this issue has changed is obliged to resign amicably and join himself to a church that suits his new conviction. Of course, he may remain with the church after resigning, and willingly request for the spiritual oversight of the church, while serving in, and enjoying whatever privileges extended to him by, that church. On his part, he must not create strife over the difference, or chaff at the teaching and practice of the church.

We consider a slightly different situation, in which the prospective member is not a new believer, who comes with some fixed convictions of his own. If the difference in his conviction concerns a distinctive of the church, he should not be accepted into membership. This is because the Confession of Faith of the church is the uniting bond among its members, and the acceptance of this person will be a breach of full subscription.

What if the difference is over a matter that is regarded as not essential or necessary to full subscription? A common example is differences over whether infants dying in infancy are saved (10:3 of the Confession). If the particular church holds this article as not essential or necessary to full subscription, the member may remain in membership, and the prospective member may be accepted into membership. The member must be prepared to accept the position of the church on the issue, and all legitimate means adopted by the church to change his view.

We consider next the fellowship between churches. Churches that come together in formal association should agree on what constitute the exceptions to full subscription in that association. Differences may be allowed among the member churches over these exceptions. The situation is different in the case of an association which includes churches that are full subscriptionist and churches that are loose subscriptionist. Such an association will not remain united for long. It is far better to have an association of full subscriptionist churches which allows for the presence of messengers from the loose subscriptionist churches as observers. What if the loose subscriptionist churches choose to have their own association? That is their prerogative, over which we will not quarrel. My aim in this article has been to persuade you to adopt the full subscription position. But you may protest and say, "Aren't you precipitating a division between the full subscriptionists and the loose subscriptionists?" My answer is that we are not precipitating, but anticipating, a division. It is far better to begin with a firm foundation than to attempt to work together with a shaky foundation, for sooner or later a division will occur.

What of the loose fellowship between churches that are not in formal association? The degree of fellowship between them is directly proportional to the truth held in common. The more truth we hold in common, the closer will be our fellowship, and vice versa. The same principle applies to the invitation of preachers to speak in our pulpits.

Finally, we consider how full subscriptionism affects the appointment of pastors. The same criteria that pertain to church membership applies to pastors. A prospective pastor who differs on those matters that are regarded by the church as not essential or necessary may be appointed to office with the proviso that he respects the position of the church and do not make an issue of those matters. A pastor who has changed his view on any article of the Confession has the duty to make it known to the eldership of the church. If his new conviction is regarded by the church as being contrary to the non-negotiables of the church, he is obliged to resign from office as well as from membership.

The two ordination vows used in many Presbyterian churches ought to be adapted and adopted by Reformed Baptist churches. The first vow is:

“Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as originally given, to be the inerrant word of God, the infallible rule of faith and practice?”

The second ordination vow is:

“Do you sincerely receive and adopt the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the articles of this system of doctrine, you will on your own initiative, make known to the eldership of this church the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow?”

Conclusion

We have covered much ground in this article. Those who are new to the idea of full subscription may think that we are treading on the border of the absurd. But please be clear as to the issue that is at stake. The full subscriptionist holds to the Confession as containing the system of truth taught in the Bible. The loose subscriptionist holds to the system he believes to be biblical, but not specifically defined, which he claims is contained in the Confession. Since that system of doctrine is not specifically defined, he is free to define it for himself. The loose subscriptionist, while professing adherence to the Confession of Faith, actually does not place much value on the Confession. The full subscriptionists may not be in total agreement among themselves on the application of their position to the ministry and life of the church, but they do declare their conviction by holding to the Confession.

Today, we have the problem of non-confessional Calvinists who claim to be Reformed when, strictly speaking, they do not qualify to be called such. We also have the problem of confessional churches who do not see the danger or inconsistency of their Loose Subscription position.

Those of us who are full subscriptionists must be mindful that correct doctrine alone - without obedience, love, and spiritual vitality - counts for nothing in the end. May God help us to hold to our doctrinal integrity as we subscribe to the Confession of Faith. Amen.

References:

1. “The Subscription Debate”, by Morton H. Smith. (Available from Southern Presbyterian Press, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 418 East Main St./P.O. Box 690, Taylors, SC 29687. Tel: (864)322-2717, Fax: (864)322-2719, < www.gpts.edu >.)
2. "Doctrinal Integrity," by Samuel Miller, Presbyterian Heritage Publications (1989).

~ ~ ~ ~ ~