

Conscience In Context

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“GOD ALONE IS LORD of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.”¹ Viewed casually and apart from context, this appeal to freedom of conscience from the Westminster Confession and the *Book of Order* might have a variety of meanings. Thankfully, upon closer examination, the very richness of its context points us in a clear direction.

The Context of History

The Westminster Assembly was called by Parliament to write a Reformed creed as the basis of unity for a national church.² Hence, the creed’s reference to “God alone” as “Lord of the conscience” was not intended to grant license to individuals or groups within the church to determine significant matters of faith or practice on their own. The authors clarify this by stating that those who use the pretense of liberty to oppose lawful ecclesiastical power may be called to account by the church.³ The confession further notes that “synods and councils” should “determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience.”⁴ The freedom the Westminster Confession defends is not freedom from the considered opinion of the wider church body, but freedom from human traditions that are not based squarely on the Word of God.⁵

By 1788 when the Synod of New York and Philadelphia included this sentence concerning freedom of the conscience in the “Historic Principles of Church Order,”⁶ the historical context had clearly changed. The pressing issue was now religious freedom from the state.⁷ This body was concerned primarily with the freedom of churches and associations of churches to determine their own doctrine apart from state control. Hence the “rights of private judgment” asserted were immediately interpreted in these words: “We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power”⁸

The authors of the Westminster Confession envisioned a national creed based squarely upon the Word of God rather than spurious human traditions. The Synod of New York and Philadelphia sought a church order free from civil control. Neither argued for the right of individuals or groups within the church to pick and choose among significant “doctrines and commandments” laid down by the wider body of which they were a part either by birth or by choice.

The Context of the *Book of Order*

The first “Principle of Church Order” in the *Book of Order* contains the statement quoted above concerning God as Lord of the conscience. The very next principle, however, adds that it is *perfectly consistent* with this freedom that “every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the *qualifications of its ministers and members*, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ hath appointed.”⁹ This authority does not infringe upon the rights of other church bodies, since they are also free to choose their own “terms.” It does not infringe upon the right of the individual, since she/he is free to withdraw or to join a different body.¹⁰

In addition, this same introductory section of the *Book of Order* is not silent concerning how we should resolve disputes that might arise concerning matters of importance in the life of the church. The “Historic Principles of Church Government” state that matters of controversy should “be finally decided by the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church.”¹¹

The Context of the Church Body

Reformed tradition specifically and Christian tradition in general have always allowed for freedom of the individual conscience in matters not essential to faith and practice.¹² But they have also affirmed that scripture is not of private interpretation¹³ so that in controversies concerning essential matters, the private conscience must yield to the determination of the wider body.¹⁴

The current debate over ordination standards surely qualifies as a controversy about an essential matter of faith and practice. Concerning this issue, however, Christian tradition as a whole and the Reformed tradition in particular have repeatedly affirmed the position of “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in

singleness.”¹⁵ This affirmation is based squarely on scripture and has stood the test of time. Our historic polity does not teach us to resolve controversy over such long-standing and essential matters by resorting to a version of “to each his own.” To do so would be to abandon our corporate responsibility and to fall into subjectivism. The right of the individual conscience before God finds its proper place only in the wider context of the conscience of the whole church before its Lord.

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Notes on "Context"

1. PCUSA, *Book of Order 2009/2011*, G-1.0301.
2. Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) 154.
3. PCUSA, *The Book of Confessions 2007*, 6.110-6.111.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.174.
5. *Ibid.*, 6.108-6.109.
6. *Book of Order*, G-1.0300, n. 3.
7. In New York, the Anglican Church had only just been disestablished in 1777. See Thomas A. Askew and Peter W. Spellman, *The Churches and the American Experience* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 69.
8. *Book of Order*, G-1.0301b.
9. *Ibid.*, G-1.0302, italics mine.
10. *Ibid.*, G-6.0108, n. 1.
11. *Ibid.*, G-1.0400. In the footnote to this paragraph, it is further clarified that "appeals" here is not referring to "a case involved in judicial process," but is used

"in a general sense." In other words, not only judicial cases, but more general matters of controversy ought to be decided by the "collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church."

12. Augustine notes that we may hold as "things indifferent" what is "clearly not contrary to the faith nor to sound morality" and what "does not admit of final decision by the authority of Holy Scripture." See Augustine, Letter 54 in *The Essential Augustine*, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 162-63.

13. 2 Peter 1:20. This is quoted in Chapter 2 of the Second Helvetic Confession in the *Book of Confessions*, 5.010.

14. *Book of Confessions*, 6.174. See also *Book of Order*, G-1.0400 and G-6.0108, n. 1. In speaking of the significance of church councils, Calvin states that "when the bishops are assembled, they can more conveniently deliberate in common what they ought to teach and in what form, lest diversity breed offence." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.9.13 (Vol. 2, p. 1176).

15. *Book of Order*, G-6.0106.