

Affirmations and Denials Regarding Recent Issues

Adopted by the Board of Trustees
Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
December 3, 2008

Introduction

Westminster Theological Seminary is a Reformed seminary that is committed to the infallibility of Scripture and has a well-defined doctrinal basis in the subordinate standards of the Westminster tradition. Each voting faculty member and each member of the Board of the Seminary is required to subscribe to the Westminster Standards, that is, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF), the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (WLC), and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (WSC). Each voting faculty member is required to make the following pledge:

I do solemnly declare, in the presence of God, and of the Trustees and Faculty of this Seminary, that (1) I believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice; and (2) I do solemnly and *ex animo* adopt, receive, and subscribe to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* in the form in which they were adopted by this Seminary in the year of our Lord 1936, as the confession of my faith, or as a summary and just exhibition of that system of doctrine and religious belief, which is contained in Holy Scripture, and therein revealed by God to man for his salvation; and I do solemnly, *ex animo*, profess to receive the fundamental principles of the Presbyterian form of church government, as agreeable to the inspired oracles. And I do solemnly promise and engage not to inculcate, teach, or insinuate anything which shall appear to me to contradict or contravene, either directly or impliedly, any element in that system of doctrine, nor to oppose any of the fundamental principles of that form of church government, while I continue a member of the Faculty in this Seminary. I do further solemnly declare that, being convinced of my sin and misery and of my inability to rescue myself from my lost condition, not only have I assented to the truth of the promises of the Gospel, but also I have received and rest upon Christ and His righteousness for pardon of my sin and for my acceptance as righteous in the sight of God and I do further promise that if at any time I find myself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, I will on my own initiative, make known to the Faculty of this institution and, where applicable, my judicatory, the change which has taken place in my views since the assumption of the vow.

Each member of the Board of Trustees subscribes to a similar pledge:

I hereby solemnly declare in the presence of God and this Board (1) that I believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, (2) that I sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Presbyterian Church in America in the form which they possessed in 1936, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, (3) that, approving the Charter of Westminster Theological Seminary, I will faithfully endeavor to carry into effect the articles and provisions of said Charter and to promote the great design of the Seminary. I do further solemnly declare

that, being convinced of my sin and misery and of my inability to rescue myself from my lost condition not only have I assented to the truth of the promises of the Gospel, but also I have received and rest upon Christ and His righteousness for pardon of my sin and for my acceptance as righteous in the sight of God.

We continue to embrace the Westminster Standards. We remain convinced that they are a sound and valuable confessional basis for the work and instruction in the Seminary.

Theological discussion at Westminster Theological Seminary has revealed several areas where it may be appropriate for the Board of the Seminary to reaffirm our continued commitment to the Westminster Standards and to presbyterian government, and to restate the nature of our commitment. We see the affirmations and denials below not as an addition to our historic subscription, but as reaffirmations and clarifications of the implications of our continued subscription.

These affirmations and denials are not in any way exhaustive. Rather, they are to be seen as selective, and as addressing only some of the matters implied in confessional subscription. The complete affirmation to which voting faculty members are bound is the faculty pledge, as quoted above and set out in the Constitution of the Seminary.

Affirmations and Denials

I. Confessional Subscription

A. Basic character of subscription

We affirm that the Standards are *subordinate* standards. Scripture itself, as the *primary* standard, is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. (See the faculty pledge; WCF 1.2; 1.10; WLC 3; WSC 2.)

We deny that the primacy of Scripture makes confessional subscription unimportant or dispensable or superfluous. (WCF 22.)

We affirm that our subscription to the Standards includes a cordial and full affirmation that the Standards are a just exhibition of the system of doctrine and religious belief, which is contained in Holy Scripture. (See faculty pledge.)

We deny that our subscription merely requires that a faculty member is to be instructed or guided by the Standards.

We affirm that the Westminster Standards are fallible, that is, that it is possible in principle that they may err, and, further, that they are open to revision. (WCF 31.4)

We deny that the Westminster Standards are infallible.

B. Progress in understanding Scripture

We affirm that Scripture contains truths not included in the Westminster Standards. (WCF 1.6.)

We deny that there are truths found in Scripture but not in the Standards that overthrow or undermine any element in the system of doctrine expounded in the Standards.

We affirm that God himself enjoins us to seek an ever deeper and more comprehensive understanding of his word. (WLC 157.)

We deny that we cannot add to or deepen the understanding of God's word expressed in the Standards.

C. Specific obligations implied by the pledge

We affirm that a person who voluntarily pledges subscription to the Standards is bound to keep his pledge. (WCF 22; 31.3.)

We deny that the Westminster Standards lack binding force on those who subscribe to them.

We affirm that a voting faculty member is not permitted to teach or insinuate something contrary to any element in the system of doctrine, even if the faculty member judges that what he is going to teach is based on Scripture. (Faculty pledge.)

We deny that an alleged Scriptural basis for a teaching eliminates the obligation imposed by the faculty pledge.

We affirm that a faculty member may present to the faculty or the Board an idea that might later be judged out of accord with the system of doctrine, in order to have that idea tested and sifted.

We deny that the confidential presentation of ideas to the faculty or Board for the purpose of testing and evaluation is in itself out of accord with the faculty pledge.

We affirm that individual faculty members may take exception to or express a scruple about a particular item or wording within the Standards.

We deny that taking an exception to a particular item necessarily implies introducing a mental reservation into the faculty pledge, or is necessarily inconsistent with the faculty pledge.

D. Judgments about subscription

We affirm that, with regard to any exception or scruple, or any other views of a faculty member, the Board and the faculty have a responsibility, both at the time of initial appointment and at all subsequent times, to make a judgment as to whether such an exception or such a view undermines the intent of the Seminary's subscription pledge.

We deny that Board and faculty judgments about compatibility with the Standards constitute an illegitimate interference with an individual's conscience or an illegitimate abridgment of academic freedom.

We affirm that, in the context of subscription by voting faculty and Board members, the meaning of any particular teaching in the Standards is determined by the Board, by referring to the historical record of orthodox Reformed tradition, and is not determined by the private interpretation of any one individual faculty member.

We deny that an individual faculty member has the right to import a private meaning into the Standards

when he subscribes, thereby avoiding the meaning commonly understood in the Reformed tradition.

II. Confession and Mission

A. Universality of truth

We affirm that the truths affirmed in the Standards are true for all times, all places, all languages, and all cultures. (WCF 1.1, 6, 8.)

We deny that the truths affirmed in the Standards are true only for their seventeenth century situation or only for some cultures or circumstances.

We affirm that a person's agreement with the content of the Standards includes agreement with all its affirmations as perennially normative, not merely agreement that they were an appropriate response to the theological, ecclesiastical, and pastoral needs of the seventeenth century.

We deny that a person's agreement with the Standards is adequate if, at any point, it merely means agreeing pragmatically with the way in which the Standards addressed the needs of their situation.

We affirm that the Standards have instructional value for all times and all cultures.

We deny that the Standards have instructional value only in some cultures.

B. The legitimacy of pedagogical adaptation

We affirm that teaching of the Standards in a particular language or culture can and should take into account the existing previous theological understanding and education, crucial theological and pastoral issues in the circumstances, and problems and opportunities arising in the church and in the surrounding culture. (WLC 159.)

We deny that theological teaching need not attend to such circumstances.

We affirm that theological teaching can legitimately adjust in teaching style, phraseology, selection of content, use of illustrations, and many other ways that prove significant in facilitating the communication and grasp of truth in the target language and culture. (WLC 159.)

We deny that adjustments in pedagogy and communicative strategy imply compromise of the truths affirmed in the Standards.

III. Scripture

A. The inspiration of Scripture

We affirm that the Holy Scripture is to be believed and obeyed, because it is the word of God. (WCF 1.4; WLC 157, 160.)

We deny that the Holy Scripture is to be believed or obeyed merely because it contains the word of God, or merely because it conveys the word of God, or merely because the Holy Spirit uses it to effect a personal encounter with God.

We affirm that what Scripture says, God says. (WCF 1.4; 1.10; 14.2.)

We deny that what Scripture says is only sometimes or only partly what God says, or that Scripture only becomes what God says in the act of communication to some person.

We affirm that in causing his word to be written down in the Bible, God, the primary author, used human writers, the secondary authors, often employing them in the full range of their personalities and existing gifts and abilities, with the exception that he kept them from error. (WCF 1.2, 4 prooftexts.)

We deny that God produced the scripture without using human authors..

We affirm that God remains true, good, pure, righteous, all-knowing, and immutable when he delivers Scripture to us, and what Scripture says--both in each detail and as a whole--is always consistent with and manifests his character. (WCF 1.4, 2.1.)

We deny that the presence of human agents in the writing of Scripture, or any other use of means, or any relation to cultural or historical circumstances in the writing, allow the interpreter to dismiss or cease to reckon with the fact that what God says in Scripture is always consistent with his character.

B. The interpretation of Scripture

We affirm that each verse and passage belongs to a larger context of other Scripture, to which God expects us to attend. (WCF 1.2, 1.9; WLC 157.)

We deny that any verse or passage can be given its full and proper interpretation by taking it in isolation from the book to which it belongs, or from the Scripture as a whole.

We affirm that we can understand passages of Scripture more deeply when we take into account the historical and cultural circumstances that they addressed. (WLC 157.)

We deny that historical and cultural circumstances are irrelevant to understanding Scriptural passages.

We affirm that Scripture makes known clearly those things necessary to be believed and observed for salvation, so that even the unlearned may come to sufficient understanding through due use of ordinary means. (WCF 1.7.)

We deny that extra-biblical knowledge of ancient customs or circumstances is necessary to understand the gospel of salvation in Christ as the central message of Scripture.

C. The pertinence of ancient contexts: Ancient Near-Eastern and First Century Mediterranean World

We affirm that God in his wisdom addressed Scripture to his people of long ago in a manner that takes into account their historical setting and their previous knowledge. (WCF 7.5, 2.1.)

We deny that Scripture fails to take into account the setting of its ancient addressees, or that it fails adequately to address ancient people.

We affirm that what Scripture affirms to its ancient addressees is always true. (WCF 2.1.)

We deny that limitations in ancient addressees and their setting may ever allow the inclusion of untruths as a part of what Scripture affirms or what it implies.

We affirm that God in producing the canon of Scripture addresses peoples of all subsequent times, places, and cultures. (WCF 1.1; 1.8; WLC 155, 156.)

We deny that God addresses only the people who lived at the time that a book was written.

We affirm that what the Scripture affirms is to be believed and obeyed by people in all places and cultures. (WCF 1.4; 14.2; WLC 156.)

We deny that what Scripture affirms lays obligations of belief and obedience only on the original recipients, or only on some cultures.

We affirm that some earlier commands of Scripture have meaning such that their application to our present circumstances must reckon with the changed redemptive-historical conditions in which God addresses us. For example, animal sacrifices that were prescribed in the Old Testament are no longer legitimate now, because Christ has offered the final sacrifice. (WCF 19.3, 4.)

We deny that there are no commands whose application varies with the changing redemptive-historical context.

D. The truthfulness of Scripture

We affirm that the Holy Scripture contains a system of doctrine. (Faculty pledge.)

We deny that the Holy Scripture lacks doctrinal unity on any point of doctrine, or that it does not always agree with itself.

We affirm that the Holy Scripture is harmonious in all its teaching. (WCF 1.9.)

We deny that there are real contradictions in Scripture.

We affirm that Scripture is truthful and without error in what it affirms. (WCF 1.4; 2.1.)

We deny that Scripture affirms anything that is factually erroneous or is incorrect.

We affirm that Scripture can quote from, allude to, or otherwise represent, in a manner distinct from its own affirmations, the fallible speech and thought deriving from fallible, sinful human beings. (E.g., "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God,"" Ps. 14:1.)

We deny that Scripture's quotation or representation of fallible thought implies Scripture's own fallibility.

E. The role of the Holy Spirit

We affirm that the work of the Holy Spirit in a person is necessary for that person properly and

savingly to understand the Scripture and that full acceptance and a willingness to submit unconditionally to its teaching is essential to such proper understanding. (WCF 10.1; 14:2; WLC 104; 155; 157; WSC 89.)

We deny that exercise of the rational powers of fallen man is sufficient for a right understanding of Scripture.

We affirm that God's truthfulness and self-consistency belong to what the Scripture says, not merely to what the Holy Spirit may be later alleged to show us through the Scripture. (WCF 1.4.)

We deny that God's authority belongs only to the Spirit's teaching from the Scripture, rather than to the Scripture itself as well.

IV. Special Areas of Interest

A. Special Area: Harmony of Scripture

We affirm that some things in Scripture are difficult to understand, and that we may not always be able easily to explain apparent contradictions. (WCF 1.7.)

We deny that all parts of Scripture are easy to understand.

We affirm that, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we can rightly become convinced from Scripture itself that it is the word of God, even when we do not have an explanation for some of the apparent discrepancies in Scripture. (WCF 1.5.)

We deny that we must find explanations for each apparent discrepancy before accepting the divine authority of Scripture and submitting to its teaching.

We affirm that each individual passage of Scripture is consistent in its affirmations with every other passage. (WCF 1.9.)

We deny that passages may contradict one another.

We affirm that when interpreting any passage, the true meaning must be found by comparing the one passage with the rest of Scripture (WCF 1.9.)

We deny that it is legitimate to give an interpretation of a passage that is not in harmony with what is affirmed in another passage or passages.

We affirm doctrinal unity and coherence in a given passage between the meaning of God, as its primary author, and the meaning of the human author, however limited may have been the understanding of the latter of what he wrote. (WCF 1.4, 5)

We deny that in a given passage the intentions of God and the human writer are doctrinally divergent or discordant.

B. Special Area: Implications of Details in Scripture, Including NT Use of the OT

We affirm that we must submit to all that Scripture affirms, not merely to its main points. (WCF 1.4; WLC 157, 160.)

We deny that the divine authority of Scripture belongs only to its main purpose or only to the main points of its various passages.

We affirm that we must submit to the New Testament affirmations concerning the Old Testament, and not merely to the conclusions that the New Testament draws from them.

We deny that it is ever allowable to submit to conclusions but not to other affirmations in the Scripture.

We affirm that the methods and reasoning that Scripture uses in reaching its conclusions are valid.

We deny that any Scripture uses invalid methods or reasoning to draw valid conclusions.

C. Special Area: Old Testament Teaching

We affirm that in the Old Testament God spoke to his people in a way that took into account their lack of detailed knowledge of the coming salvation to be revealed in the New Testament. (WCF 7.5.)

We deny that there are no differences between the Old and New Testaments.

We affirm that what God said in the Old Testament is always in harmony with later teaching in the New Testament, though it may not always be as full or explicit. (WCF 7.)

We deny that the New Testament shows any contradiction to what is in the Old Testament.

We affirm that we can sometimes understand passages in the Old Testament more deeply in the light of the later revelation that God has given us in Christ. (WCF 7.5.)

We deny that we can never have more understanding of an Old Testament passage than what was available to people when it was first given.

We affirm that God's intention with respect to an Old Testament passage is consistent with his later reference to or allusion to that passage in the New Testament. (WCF 1.9.)

We deny that God's intentions at two different points in time, or in two different texts, are ever in disharmony.

We affirm doctrinal continuity and harmony between the original historical and human meaning of an Old Testament text and the meaning a New Testament writer attributes to that text. (WCF 1.5; 1.9.)

We deny that there is any doctrinal divergence or disparity between the original historical and human meaning of an Old Testament text and its use in the New Testament.

D. Special Area: Old Testament History

We affirm that Adam and Eve were real flesh-and-blood individual human beings and that their fall into sin was subsequent to their creation as the first human beings. (WCF 6.1; 7.2; WLC 17.)

We deny that the narrative in Genesis 3 is merely symbolic for what is true of mankind in general.

We affirm that God's acts of creation, as listed in each of the six days of Genesis 1, really happened in space and time. (WCF 4.1; WLC 15.)

We deny that Genesis 1 merely teaches that God made everything.

We affirm that in Genesis 1 God communicated to ancient people in a manner intelligible to them. (WCF 1.7.)

We deny that Genesis 1 requires special modern knowledge or scientific knowledge for it to be understood.

We affirm that in the Scripture God does not endorse at any point a faulty worldview or cosmology or a faulty aspect thereof. (WCF 1.4; 2.1.)

We deny that Scripture at any point affirms a faulty cosmology.

We affirm that Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were real people who went through the experiences that Genesis describes them as going through. (WCF 1.4; 2.1; 14.2; WLC 160.)

We deny that the narratives in Genesis about the patriarchs are merely legendary, or that only some smaller core of events really happened.

Westminster Seminary Distinctives

Westminster Theological Seminary defines its distinctive role most basically by its confessional commitment to the Westminster Standards. But we also value the insights that have grown up at Westminster over the decades as the faculty has continued to reflect on the Bible within the doctrinal framework provided by the Standards. We affirm the value of systematic theology in the tradition of John Murray, of biblical theology in the tradition of Geerhardus Vos, of presuppositional apologetics in the tradition of Cornelius Van Til, of biblical counseling in the tradition of Jay Adams, and of missiology in the tradition of Harvie Conn. When rightly done, these programs of investigation and practice build on the truths articulated in the Westminster Standards. The Standards guide us in these disciplines by giving them a sound doctrinal basis. The disciplines show the fruit of the truths of Scripture by applying them to new areas of reflection.

We affirm the value of the disciplines of systematic theology, biblical theology, presuppositional apologetics, biblical counseling, and missiology as these have been practiced at Westminster Seminary.

We deny that these disciplines, when rightly understood and practiced, are in tension with our confessional Standards.

We affirm the importance of conducting these disciplines in conformity with the Standards and the faculty pledge.

We deny that these disciplines need freedom to reach conclusions that may prove to be contrary to the Standards.

We affirm that these disciplines can offer fruitful service both for the church and for growth in understanding of the doctrines of the Standards.

We deny that we have nothing to learn from these disciplines that could deepen or improve our understanding of doctrine.

We affirm that biblical theology (attention to the text in its redemptive-historical context) is the indispensable servant of systematic theology—*indispensable* because it is essential for the sound exegesis on which systematic theology depends, a *servant* because it contributes to the presentation, under appropriate topics, of the teaching of Scripture as a whole and in its overall unity that systematic theology is concerned to provide for the life of the church and its mission in the world.

We deny that biblical theology and systematic theology, properly understood, are in conflict or are alternative approaches to Scripture independent of each other, or that either is dispensable.

We affirm that the teachings of Scripture concerning God, Christ, man, sin, salvation, and other topics, as those teachings are summarized in systematic theology, offer a sound framework in which to conduct the work of exegesis and biblical theology.

We deny that exegesis or biblical theology can be properly conducted without submission to or in tension with the teaching of Scripture as a whole.