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# The Confession of Faith in Cumberland Presbyterian History

by *Hubert W. Morrow*

THE STORY OF THE CONFESSION OF FAITH in Cumberland Presbyterian history will be unfolded in three parts. The first part will explore the theological roots of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in the history of the main body of American Presbyterianism in the eighteenth century. The second part will describe certain aspects of Cumberland Presbyterian theology that are reflected in (1) a revision of the Westminster Confession in 1814; and (2) the theological developments that set the stage for a further revision of the confession in 1883.

The third part will show (1) the impact on the Cumberland Presbyterian Church of certain amendments to the Westminster Confession, adopted by the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., in 1903; (2) the partial merger of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church with the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., in 1906; and (3) the developments in the continuing Cumberland Presbyterian Church which led to the approval of a new Confession of Faith in 1984.

This story will reveal how in the two hundred years of Cumberland Presbyterian history there evolved an understanding of the nature and authority of a confession of faith that is distinctive in American Presbyterianism. In general, it is that a confession of faith is regarded as a living document, which periodically should be reexamined in light

of what the church at a given point in its history believes to be the essential teachings of scripture.

## I

The roots of the Cumberland Presbyterian view of the nature and authority of a confession of faith are found in the tensions in the main body of American Presbyterianism which attended and followed the adoption of the Westminster Confession by the Synod of Philadelphia in 1729. Called the "subscription controversy," the issue was whether and in what sense subscription to the Westminster Confession as the doctrinal standards of the church would be required of all ministers.<sup>1</sup>

According to Leonard J. Trinterud, Jonathan Dickinson was the leader of a New England group of ministers who opposed the introduction of the "subscription controversy" into the Philadelphia Synod. "When the synod met in 1722 Dickinson preached the opening sermon. He argued that the Bible was a sufficient rule on all the major issues of critical importance."<sup>2</sup> Debate on the issue of subscription continued. At the meeting of Philadelphia Synod in 1729, John Thomson introduced an overture that called for adoption of and subscription to the Westminster Confession. Jonathan

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Dickinson led the opposition to the overture, arguing that no document of “human composure” should usurp the position of authority that belonged only to the scriptures.

The outcome of the debate was the approval by the synod of what was called the Adopting Act of 1729. The act provided:

All ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in, and approbation of, the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essentials and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and do also adopt the said confession and catechism as the confession of our faith.<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that in this quotation from the Adopting Act the Confession and Catechisms are described as “being in all the essentials and necessary articles good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine.” A later provision in the act seems to suggest that the documents also contained other articles that were not “essential and necessary.” This provision came to be known as “the right to scruple.” It stated,

In case any minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within its bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential or necessary in doctrine, worship or government.<sup>4</sup>

Trinterud calls the Adopting Act a compromise between the views of the New England and the Scotch Irish wings of the church, and describes it in this manner. “First, in these Westminster Standards there were some doctrines that were necessary and essential to the whole, and others that were not. Secondly, it was granted that these essentials might be understood and stated differently by some.”<sup>5</sup> This distinction between essentials and nonessentials created a situation in which there were persons who favored “strict subscription” and those who favored “loose subscription.”

The ambiguities of the Adopting Act continued to plague Philadelphia Synod. In the meantime the impact of the Great Awakening on the American Presbyterian church added to the tensions between “strict subscriptionists” and “loose subscriptionists.” The approach and content of the preaching of Presbyterian ministers active in the Great Awakening put stress on the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement as stated in the Westminster Confession. The ultimate outcome of the growing tensions at this point was one factor in a schism in the church between the Old Side and New Side factions, and the formation of New York Synod in 1745.<sup>6</sup>

Although the schism between the Old Side and New Side factions in the church was overcome in the reunion of 1758, the tensions continued. Increasingly it was the evangelical preaching of the New Side ministers that alarmed the strict subscriptionists. An illustration can be found in a sermon by Samuel Davies, president of the newly founded College of New Jersey (1759–61). Sensitive to the apparent incompatibility between evangelical preaching and the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement, Davies argued that the reprobation of persons is not the consequence of divine decrees before the foundation of the world, but of their own sinful actions in time. He said, “This you may be sure of, that if you have not made yourselves fit for destruction ...by your own wilful sin you shall never be doomed by virtue of any decree of God.”<sup>7</sup>

It was this kind of evangelical preaching by a substantial number of ministers in Cumberland Presbytery, Kentucky Synod, that helped initiate what has been called the Great Revival of 1800. The Presbyterian ministers who were active in this event were increasingly uncomfortable with the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement as formulated in the Westminster Confession. A leader of this group, James McGready, urged care concerning the way in which these doctrines were interpreted. “Someone in his great zeal for the truth contends warmly for predestination, elec-

tion, and final perseverance, and unless he is very cautious, he will do it in the wrong manner."<sup>8</sup>

Loose subscription with respect to the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement in the Westminster Confession was a significant factor in the action of a commission of Kentucky Synod (Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.) in 1805 to suspend approximately half of the ministers in Cumberland Presbytery, and later to dissolve the presbytery. The commission set as a condition for the removal of the suspension of the ministers, an unqualified subscription to the Westminster Confession.

The ministers in Cumberland Presbytery who were thus suspended insisted that the only scruple they had ever raised concerning the Westminster Confession was in regard to "the concise manner in which the highly mysterious doctrines of divine decrees, is there expressed, which is thought led to fatality."<sup>9</sup> In defense of their action to refuse strict subscription to the Westminster Confession on these points of doctrine, they argued, "The compilers of the Confession of Faith and Discipline of our church never intended it to be considered an infallible standard by which the Holy Ghost must be limited, when he calls men to the sacred office."<sup>10</sup>

The ultimate outcome of the controversy was that the action of the commission of Kentucky Synod was allowed to stand. Some of the suspended ministers finally agreed to strict subscription to the Westminster Confession on the points of doctrine at issue, and their suspension was lifted.

## II

Samuel McAdow, Samuel King, and Finis Ewing were three of the ministers who declined to affirm a strict subscription with respect to the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement as stated in the Westminster Confession. They met on February 4, 1810, reorganized Cumberland Presbytery, and sought readmission to Kentucky Synod of the Presbyterian Church. The com-

pact into which they entered stated that "all the licentiates or probationers, who may thereafter be ordained by this presbytery shall be required to adopt the Confession and Discipline of the Presbyterian Church except the idea of fatality, that seems to be taught under the mysterious doctrine of predestination."<sup>11</sup> They indicated a willingness, however, to allow those who could clearly receive the confession without exception to do so.

Very quickly other ordained Presbyterian ministers joined the reorganized Cumberland Presbytery, several candidates for the ministry were accepted, and a number of congregations were enrolled. In 1813, when all hope of readmission to Kentucky Synod had disappeared, Cumberland Presbytery was divided into three presbyteries and Cumberland Synod was formed. The Cumberland Presbyterian Church had come into being, in some sense as another schism in the Presbyterian Church. At that time thirteen ordained ministers were listed on the rolls of the three presbyteries. Immediately the newly formed synod appointed a commission of four ministers—Finis Ewing, Thomas Calhoun, William McGee, and Robert Donnell—to prepare a revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The initial refusal of McAdow, Ewing, and King to give strict subscription to the Westminster Confession, and the subsequent appointment of a commission by Cumberland Synod to prepare a proposed revision of the confession, marked the beginning of a distinctive tradition in American Presbyterianism with respect to how the nature of a confession of faith is understood, and how a confession functions as a source of authority in faith and practice. At a meeting of Cumberland Synod in 1814, the revised edition of the Westminster Confession proposed by the commission was adopted. The revisions were primarily in Chapter III, "Of God's Eternal Decree," Chapter X, "Of Effectual Calling," and Chapter XI, "Of Justification." They consisted of deletions or revisions of all sections containing the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement.

Chapter III of the Westminster Confession, "Of God's Eternal Decree," contained the doctrine of predestination. This was reduced from eight subsections to two. The key subsections in the Westminster Confession read:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined to everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death. These men and angels, thus predestined and fore-ordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished. (W.C., III, iii, iv).

These subsections and the rest of the chapter were changed and reduced to the following:

God has not decreed anything respecting his creature man, contrary to his revealed will or written word, which declares his sovereignty over all his creatures, the ample provision he hath made for their salvation, his determination to punish the finally impenitent with everlasting destruction, and to save the true believers with everlasting salvation.<sup>12</sup>

The other major revisions dealt with sections on the atonement provided through Jesus Christ, which in the Westminster Confession was limited to the elect, including elect infants. (W.C. VIII, v; X, i, iii, iv; XI, iv). These were revised to assert that "Jesus Christ by the grace of God has tasted death for every man, and now makes intercession for transgressors." (1814 C.P.C VIII, viii). Moreover, God through the Holy Spirit calls all persons out of the "state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ." (1814 C.P.C. X, i). Persons in their freedom may respond in repentance and faith and be saved, or remain in bondage to sin and death. Finally, "All infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ, through the Spirit." (1814 C.P.C. X, iii). The rationale given for these changes was that the theology of the Westminster Confession on these points of doctrine was not in accord with scripture. In effect, they applied the criterion first enunciated by Jonathan Dickinson in the Adoption Controversy: that no document of "human



The Reverend Finis Ewing

composure" should usurp the authority that belongs only to scripture.

Apart from some minor changes in other sections, the 1814 revision left the Westminster Confession essentially intact. The chapter headings and the sequence of the chapters remained the same. This meant that persons familiar with the Westminster Confession did not encounter difficulty in using the 1814 Cumberland Presbyterian Confession. There was a sense of continuity, but it was a dynamic rather than a static continuity. Overall the effect of the 1814 revision was to assert that the theology of the church as represented in the confession of faith is a living tradition.

The 1814 revision of the Westminster Confession was relatively limited. As early as 1849 a memorial was sent to the General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church calling for further revisions of the 1814 document. The Assembly concluded that there was no widespread desire for such a revision. The question of revision was raised again at meetings of the Assembly in 1851 and 1852. Still unconvinced, the Assembly cautioned, "Should the walls once

be thrown down, it would be difficult, if not impossible, ever to build them up so as to suit the peculiar taste of each." The report went on to say, "We think, therefore, the old forms are the best as they stand, allowing each this liberty."<sup>13</sup>

Apparently there was a stronger sentiment for revision than two successive Assemblies had assessed. Those who favored further revisions argued that extensive revisions of the Westminster Confession were needed to eliminate the influences of the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement on other doctrines. A memorial to the General Assembly in 1853 asked that a committee be appointed to prepare a revision of the 1814 Confession, and the request was granted. The report of the committee to the General Assembly in 1854 called for a limited revision, and recommended certain changes for referral to the presbyteries for their actions. The proposal for revision lost by a vote of the Assembly, sixty-four to forty-one.<sup>14</sup>

In 1881 another effort was begun for a revision of the 1814 Confession of Faith. The motivation for such an undertaking was a desire to have a confession of faith that stated more clearly what the church at that time believed to be the essential teachings of scripture. A committee of three persons was appointed by the General Assembly to draft a proposed revision, and a second committee of five persons was appointed to review the draft of the proposed revision, with the final result to be reported to the 1882 Assembly. The final draft of the revision was approved by the 1882 Assembly for referral to the presbyteries for their vote. The 1883 Assembly reported that the required number of presbyteries had approved the proposed revision.<sup>15</sup>

In its content, the 1883 Confession of Faith was a more radical revision of the 1814 Confession than the latter had been of the Westminster Confession. The most radical overall change was in the way God's relation to the human family was understood. In the Westminster Confession, and in the 1814 Cumberland Presbyterian Confession, the original and continuing relation of God to

the human family was defined by a covenant of law, or works. This covenant was made with Adam and Eve, and through them as legal representatives, with all their descendants. This covenant promised life for obedience and death for disobedience. The subsequent disobedience by Adam and Eve made them and their descendants subject to the penalty of death. In mercy God provided a second chance in a covenant of grace, whereby Jesus Christ suffered the penalty of death imposed by the covenant of law, and thereby provided salvation conditionally for all persons.

The 1883 Cumberland Presbyterian Confession of Faith began the process of dismantling the two-covenant theology, not by removing the concept altogether, but by restricting its effects on other doctrines. Three important examples are cited. First, in the section on "The Law of God," the Westminster Confession and the 1814 Cumberland Presbyterian Confession say, "God gave Abraham a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact and perpetual obedience." (W.C. XIX, i; 1814 C.P.C. XIX, i). The 1883 Cumberland Presbyterian Confession does not use the term "covenant of law" anywhere in the section on "The Law of God." Rather, it defines the moral law as "the rule of duty growing immediately out of the relations of rational creatures to their Creator and to each other." (1883 C.P.C., 66).

The second example is in the description of the consequences of disobedience. In the Westminster Confession and in the 1814 Cumberland Presbyterian Confession, punishment for disobedience is said to be administered by God, as a judge. In the 1883 Cumberland Presbyterian Confession, it is said, "The penalties of this [moral] law are the natural and subjective sequences of transgression.... These moral retributions must be distinguished from judicial punishments." (1883 C.P.C., 70).

The third example deals with the doctrine of atonement. The Westminster Confession and the 1814 Cumberland Presbyterian Confession say, "Christ, by his obedience

and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf." (W.C., XI, iii; 1814 C.P.C., XI, iii). The 1883 Cumberland Presbyterian Confession changes the concept of "satisfaction" to "propitiation." Jesus Christ, by his "perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself...became the propitiation for the sins of the whole world." (1883 C.P.C., 31). "Satisfaction" is an act designed to meet the conditions of the law. "Propitiation" is an act designed to restore a broken personal relationship.

That this meaning was intended is supported by the fact that the chairperson of the committee of three which wrote the original draft of the 1883 Confession was S. G. Burney, professor of theology at Cumberland University. Burney published a book on the atonement in which he argued that the relationship of persons to God was like that of children to a parent, rather than that of citizens to a moral governor. He defined sin as being like an act of rebellion of a child against a parent, rather than breaking a law by a citizen. Therefore, what is needed is propitiation, an act of self-giving love by a Mediator, designed to restore the broken personal relationship.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the 1883 revision changed the sequence of some of the chapters in the 1814 Confession, to reflect more clearly the conditional character of the experience of salvation. The section on "Effective Calling" was changed to "Divine Influence," and further revised. The sections on "Repentance unto Life" and "Saving Grace" (changed to "Saving Faith") were placed before the section on "Justification." This was done to emphasize the conditional character of the covenant of grace.

Though the 1883 Confession of Faith was a more radical revision of the 1814 Confession than the latter had been of the Westminster Confession, there was nevertheless a substantial degree of continuity. For the most part the major theological categories represented by the chapter headings were the same, with some rearrangement of

sequence. The 1883 Confession is shorter overall. Otherwise, much of the content remained essentially unchanged. The evidence from theological literature of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in the last half of the nineteenth century supports the conclusion that the changes in some of the doctrines were in keeping with what had become the theological mind of the church: what the church believed to be the essential teachings of scripture. There was a reasonable balance between theological stability and theological change. Evidence of this is found in the ease with which the church began to lay aside the 1814 Confession and to use the 1883 Confession. The principle of continuity coupled with openness to change affirmed that Cumberland Presbyterian theology was a living tradition. The confession of faith which stated this theology was a living document. That this was the view which the church had of its theology as embodied in the 1883 Confession of Faith is reflected in statements by two leading clergymen who were members of the revision committee. A. B. Miller, president of Waynesburg College, Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, described a particular confession of faith as "but a temporary halting place in the march of mind."<sup>17</sup> W. J. Darby, pastor of First Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Evansville, Indiana, said of the 1883 Confession that history would record "the Church has nobly served in the forefront of those who have wrought out the triumphs of liberal Presbyterianism in this country."<sup>18</sup> J. M. Howard, another minister, wrote: "Let it be understood, in short, that ours is not a fixed and changeless, but a progressive creed; and that through the decades we are to seek a more and more nearly exact statement of the truth revealed in Scripture, and believed by our own people."<sup>19</sup>

### III

As the Cumberland Presbyterian Church entered the twentieth century, it was the third largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States of America. Its evangelical

theology and preaching, coupled with a determination to follow the moving frontier westward, enabled it to plant congregations from eastern Tennessee and Kentucky and western Pennsylvania to the West Coast in California, Oregon, and Washington. It was soon, however, to become involved in the most serious crisis in its history since its origin in 1810.

In 1906 a portion of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church merged with the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., on the basis of a Westminster Confession to which certain amendments and a "Declaratory Statement" were added in 1903. The event of union was very significant, both for that segment of the church which merged with the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., and for that segment which reconstituted the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. For these reasons, and in order to understand how the event came about, an inquiry will be made into developments in nineteenth-century Presbyterianism which led to the amendments and the "Declaratory Statement."

The historical context was something of a continuation of the subscription controversy that existed in American Presbyterianism in the eighteenth century. This controversy involved primarily the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement. Only the names of the two parties were changed from Old Side to Old School and New Side to New School. As George Marsden states in his book *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience*, "The meaning of subscription to the Westminster Standards was the only major issue on which the two schools could not readily agree."<sup>20</sup>

During the Civil War, the main body of American Presbyterianism divided along sectional lines. After the war the northern segment, the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., continued to deal with the subscription issue. Toward the end of the century, this issue seemed no longer foremost in the minds of a substantial part of the northern branch of the Presbyterian Church. In a book published in 1963, Robert Hastings Nichols claimed that by the end of the nineteenth century "Ameri-

can Presbyterians by and large no longer believed in several of the best known affirmations of the Westminster Confession."<sup>21</sup> It was this development that enabled the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. in 1903 to approve amendments to the Westminster Confession dealing with the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement.

Under the heading, "Of the Love of God and Missions," one amendment states, "God in infinite and perfect love, having provided in the covenant of grace, through the mediation and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, a way of salvation, sufficient for and adapted to the whole lost race of man, doth freely offer this salvation to all men in the Gospel."<sup>22</sup> To reinforce this amendment the "Declaratory Statement" adds: "God desires not the death of any sinner, but has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and freely offered in the Gospel to all; ... that his decree hinders no man from accepting that offer; and that no man is condemned except on the ground of his sin." Going further to remove one of the most objectionable ramifications of the doctrine of limited atonement, the "Declaratory Statement" affirms, "We believe that all [infants] dying in infancy are included in the election of grace, and are regenerated and saved in Christ."<sup>23</sup>

Despite the fact that these additions radically altered the theology of certain sections of the Westminster Confession, it is significant that the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., declined to change the original text of the confession. In effect, the church simply provided a legitimate way for both a loose subscription and a strict subscription to those sections that had been the primary points of tension. The changes were represented as an effort to "express more fully the doctrines of the church concerning the Holy Spirit, Missions and the love of God for all men."<sup>24</sup>

A majority of Cumberland Presbyterians read these additions in a somewhat different way. They regarded them as an indication that the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., finally had come to accept the historic position of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church with respect to the doctrines of predestination



and limited atonement. It was this conviction that led the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, in 1906, to merge with the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., on the basis of the Westminster Confession of Faith as amended in 1903.

A minority of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, approximately one-third of its membership and ministers, was not convinced that the doctrines of predestination and limited atonement had in fact been abandoned by the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. They were troubled by the fact that the sections of the Westminster Confession containing these doctrines had not been altered in any way. To them, it seemed that the two amendments and the "Declaratory Statement" simply claimed that the sections of the Westminster Confession containing the doctrines didn't mean what they clearly said. This minority reconstituted the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

During the first four decades after 1906, the continuing Cumberland Presbyterian Church was preoccupied with the reestablishment and reorganization of the church. By mid-century the institutional forms of the reorganized church had stabilized, and a new generation of leaders had emerged. Many in the new generation of leaders were influenced by the theological movement known as neo-orthodoxy. The theological ferment that resulted was a major factor in generating interest in another revision of the Confession of Faith. In 1977 this interest influenced the General Assembly of the church to consider the possibility of a revision of the 1883 Confession of Faith. In 1978 the General Assembly appointed a committee of twenty-one persons, including members from both the Negro (Second Cumberland Presbyterian Church, now Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America) and white branches of the church, to prepare the initial draft of a proposed revision of the 1883 Confession of Faith.

The process by which the final draft of the document came into being was designed to involve the whole church. The initial draft from the committee was given to a panel of

readers, who shared their comments and criticisms with the committee. A second draft was prepared in light of these comments and criticisms, and copies were mailed to each minister and congregation. The instructions were to study the proposed confession and mail comments to the stated clerk of the General Assembly, to be given to the committee. These comments were duplicated and a copy given to each member of the committee. In light of this input from the grass roots of the church, the committee prepared a final draft of the proposed confession and submitted it to the General Assemblies of both branches of the church in 1983. Both Assemblies approved the proposed confession for referral to the presbyteries for their action.

The two general assemblies met in joint session in Chattanooga in 1984, and each reported approval of the proposed confession by the necessary constitutional majority of presbyteries. For the third time in its history, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church had examined its confession of faith in light of how it understood the essential doctrines of the Christian religion, as revealed in scripture. Again the process showed both a substantial continuity in its theological tradition and an openness to change. As a church in the Reformed tradition, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was continually being reformed.<sup>25</sup>

The most significant overall characteristic of the 1984 Confession of Faith is that the theological doctrines it contains are set in the context of the covenant of grace. The process of dismantling the two-covenant theology (covenant of law or works and covenant of grace) begun in the 1883 Confession is completed in the 1984 Confession. Its theology is appropriately described as a theology of God's grace; the grace (gift) with which God is bound to the whole creation, but particularly to the covenant community. God's grace (gift) is none other than God's love manifested in Jesus the Messiah. This is the reason that the text John 3:16 stands as the first statement in the confession.

A second overall characteristic of the confession is its structure as a story of what God has said and done and is saying and doing, and how persons have responded and are responding to God's word and deed. This characteristic is reflected in the headings of the seven major divisions of the confession: "God Speaks to the Human Family," "The Human Family Breaks Relationship with God," "God Acts Through Jesus Christ to Reconcile the World," "God Acts Through the Holy Spirit," "God Creates the Church for Mission," "Christians Live and Witness in the World," "God Consummates All Life and History." Under these seven headings, the confession claims all of the essential doctrines contained in the scriptures may be found.

This is the reason that in the "Introduction" to the 1984 Confession it is said, "The organizing principle of this Confession is to tell the story of the Bible in the way the Bible tells it." This does not mean that the text of the confession is in narrative form. Rather it means that through reflection on the Biblical story the particular body of believers called Cumberland Presbyterians have identified the essential things God has said and done and is saying and doing, and the essential things persons have said and done and are saying and doing in response to God's grace. These essentials have been formulated as statements of beliefs—a confession of faith by a people of faith.

If the story of the Bible is to be told the way the Bible tells it, understanding the nature of the Bible is critical, as is the approach to its interpretation. The confession identifies the contents of the Bible in this way: "In and through the scriptures God speaks about creation, sin, judgment, salvation, the church and growth of believers." With respect to these matters, "The scriptures are the infallible rule of faith and practice, the authoritative guide to Christian living" (1984 C.P.C., 1.05). The confession proceeds to establish the most important of all principles of interpretation: "God's word spoken in and through the scriptures should be understood in light of the birth, life, death

and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth" (1984 C.P.C., 1.06). Finally, in studying the scriptures persons should seek "the illumination of God's own Spirit," utilize the results of Bible study done by persons through the centuries, and "share insights with others in the covenant community" (1984 C.P.C., 1.07).

It was noted above that the most significant characteristic of the 1984 Confession is that all its doctrines are set in the context of the covenant of grace. This characteristic deserves further illustration by specific examples. The doctrine of God describes the divine-human relationship in terms of a covenant initiated by God (1984 C.P.C., 1.03). In the doctrine of Christ this covenant is identified as a covenant of grace, and affirms that "Jesus Christ is its ultimate and supreme expression" (1984 C.P.C., 3.03). As the manifestation of God's reconciling love, God in Jesus Christ "willingly suffered sin and death for every person." In the resurrection of Jesus Christ lies the hope of all those who are in bondage to sin and death, of being resurrected to new life by the Holy Spirit (1984 C.P.C., 3.09, 3.10).

The sections of the confession which describe the experience of salvation of persons emphasize that it is a miracle of God's grace in Jesus Christ (1984 C.P.C., 4.01, 4.20). The faith by which one is able to respond positively to the gospel is "a gift made possible through God's love and initiative" (1984 C.P.C., 4.09). Salvation is described as an experience of being restored to a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, not a legal acquittal. Finally, it is affirmed that "the transformation of believers in regeneration and sanctification will be brought to completion. Although believers sin and thereby displease God, the covenant relationship is maintained by God, who will preserve them in eternal life" (1984 C.P.C., 4.24).

The seven major divisions of the confession cover the doctrines listed under the chapter headings in the 1814 and 1883 confessions, but often under different titles, and sometimes in different locations. Persons familiar with the 1883 Confession have

had little difficulty in finding corresponding sections in the 1984 Confession. Two of the divisions, "God Creates the Church for Mission" and "Christians Live and Witness in the World," have been significantly enlarged as compared to corresponding materials in the 1883 Confession.

The reception of the 1984 Confession of Faith by the ministers and congregations of the two branches of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church is substantial evidence that it reflects the "working theology" of the church in the last decades of the twentieth century. It is regarded as a warm, evangelical document that both nurtures and inspires the faith of this particular segment of the covenant community.

#### IV

In the schism of 1745 in the Presbyterian Church, the New Side faction, which generally favored loose subscription, never proposed a revision of the Westminster Confession. In the Old School-New School schism in 1838, another theological document (the Auburn Declaration) was involved; but this was not proposed as a revision of the Westminster Confession, only as an effort to restate some of its doctrines in language more compatible with evangelical preaching. In 1902 the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. declined to alter the text of the Westminster Confession in those sections dealing with predestination and limited atonement. Rather, other materials were added, which authorized a loose subscription of these sections.

By contrast, in its action in 1814 to revise sections of the Westminster Confession dealing with predestination and limited atonement, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church took a bold step not previously considered by those who argued for loose subscription of the Westminster Confession. This initial action, together with subsequent revisions of its confession of faith in 1883 and 1984, reflects four affirmations of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church concerning the nature of a confession of faith and how it should func-

tion as an authority for faith and practice.

These affirmations are as follows: (1) It is important that a church confess its faith; that it state in a relatively brief and systematic way what are believed to be the essential theological doctrines found in scripture. (2) It is important that a church remember at all times that such a confession of faith is a "document of human composure," and therefore reflects the imperfections and limits of human understanding. It should never become a "paper pope." (3) A confession of faith should reflect the "working theology" in the preaching of its ministers and in the beliefs of its informed lay persons, but significant revisions should not be done frequently, simply in response to "pop theology." (4) A confession of faith should be used as a guide in the study of scripture, not as a tool in enforcing theological conformity.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of this background, see Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 38–42.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>3</sup>*Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841), 92.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Trinterud, *Forming of an American Tradition*, 49.

<sup>6</sup>For a full account of this continuing controversy between 1829 and 1845, see Trinterud, *Forming of an American Tradition*, 49–121.

<sup>7</sup>Samuel Davies, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, ed. Albert Barnes (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1849), 277.

<sup>8</sup>James McGready, *The Posthumous Works of the Reverend James McGready*, ed. James Smith (Louisville: W. W. Worsley, 1831), 284.

<sup>9</sup>"Letter of the Council of Revival Ministers," in James Smith, *History of the Christian Church* (Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Office, 1835), 622.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>*A Circular Letter*, ed. Edward L. Warren (Louisville: *Courier-Journal*, 1906), 13.

<sup>12</sup>1814 Cumberland Presbyterian Confession of Faith, in *The Constitution of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Pittsburgh: Pennsylvania Synod of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1839), III, ii.

<sup>13</sup>*Minutes of the General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Nashville: Office of the Stated Clerk, 1852), 44.

<sup>14</sup>*Minutes of the General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Nashville: Office of the Stated Clerk, 1854), 15, 22.

<sup>15</sup>*Confession of Faith and Government of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1883* (Memphis: Fron-

tier Press, 1979).

<sup>16</sup>See Stanford G. Burney, *Atonement: Soteriology, the Sacrificial, in Contrast with the Penal, Substitutionary, and Merely Moral or Exemplary Theories of Propitiation* (Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Publishing House, 1887).

<sup>17</sup>A. B. Miller, *Doctrines and Genius of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Nashville, Cumberland Presbyterian Publishing House, 1892), 13.

<sup>18</sup>W. J. Darby, *Our Position, or Cumberland Presbyterians in Relation to the Presbyterian Family* (Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Publishing House, n.d.), 2, 15.

<sup>19</sup>J. M. Howard, "The New Confession," *Cumberland Presbyterian*, 17 May 1883.

<sup>20</sup>George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven:

Yale University Press, 1970), 213.

<sup>21</sup>Robert Hastings Nichols, *Presbyterianism in New York State*, ed. James Hastings Nichols (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 185.

<sup>22</sup>"The [Westminster] Confession of Faith," in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America...as Amended in the Years 1805–1908* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sunday School Work, 1909), Chapter xxxv, 1.

<sup>23</sup>Westminster Confession, "Declaratory Statement," *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>24</sup>Westminster Confession, "Preamble to New Chapters," *ibid.*, 138.

<sup>25</sup>*Confession of Faith and Government of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America, 1984* (Memphis: Office of the General Assembly, 1996).