

RPCUS DISTINCTIVES AND THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

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Introduction

The governing constitution of the RPCUS (Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States) is the original Westminster Confession of Faith with its accompanying Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the Form of Presbyterian Church Government, and the Directory For Public Worship of God. Outside of its general commitment to the doctrines of the Reformed Faith found in the Westminster Standards, the RPCUS is known for its adherence to four specific areas in addition to all other Reformed doctrines in the Standards. The purpose of this article is to outline these distinctives, giving documentation from the Standards for their insistence. There are those in the Reformed community who already have a perception of the RPCUS' distinctives, and others are unaware of them. This paper will clarify those distinctives.

What are the particular distinctives characterizing this denomination? First, we affirm a presuppositional approach to apologetics. We also acknowledge ourselves to be a theonomic denomination. Third, we believe in a postmillennial eschatology. Fourth, the RPCUS advocates that all areas of ecclesiastical authority be exercised by biblically qualified males. Specifically, the RPCUS only allows male heads of households to participate in congregational voting.

The question that has been raised by some Reformed brethren is: To what extent does the RPCUS demand subscription of its officers to these distinctives? The answer is: The RPCUS requires all of its teaching and ruling elders along with its deacons to subscribe to these distinctives. These distinctives are not the only emphases of the denomination, for they are only part of that total Reformed system of doctrine set forth by the Standards. Allegiance to these four distinctives does not mean that the RPCUS is obsessed with only these four areas. The denomination is committed to all of the Reformed doctrines set forth by each chapter of the Confession. Moreover, the RPCUS insists that these four distinctives are inseparable from the entire system of doctrine delineated by the Standards. The denomination would not see contrary views as acceptable exceptions to the Standards.

The reason why we are drawing attention to these four distinctives is because other Presbyterian denominations permit divergent views in these areas. For example, some Presbyterian denominations practice eschatological liberty. They permit their officers to hold to historic premillennial and amillennial schemes. In rare instances, dispensational premillennialists have been accepted into various presbyteries. The RPCUS does not practice eschatological liberty. We do not believe that the Standards are eschatologically vague. We believe that eschatology plays a key role in the overall system of doctrine taught in our Standards and in the Word of God. For one's future view powerfully impacts one's present actions.

Before we discuss these four distinctives, we need to define "strict subscription" to the Westminster Standards. Strict subscription does not mean that we view the Westminster Standards to be on par with Scripture. The Scripture alone is preeminently authoritative. The Westminster Confession of Faith is careful to make this point in chapter 1 section X which reads, "The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined,

and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the scripture.”

The RPCUS believes that the ordination vow taken by all of its officers is itself a strict subscription to the Westminster Standards. The vow reads, “Do you sincerely receive and fully adopt the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of this church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures...?” Strict subscription does mean that one adopts all the doctrines set forth in every chapter of the Confession. Someone might ask, “How far does the RPCUS take its demand for subscription?” The answer is : It goes as far as every chapter of the Confession and every question of the Larger and Shorter Catechisms.

Strict subscription does not mean that one must adopt every wording of the Standards as the best explanation of the system of doctrine. Of course, we must be careful with any modification of words seeing that words are the vehicles that convey thought. Moreover, we must be careful not to twist the meaning of words in order to create a different sense than originally intended. This type of perversion was done by the 1972 PCUS General Assembly pertaining to the meaning of the phrase, “containing the system of doctrine.” The General Assembly said with reference to the Standards, “On the other hand, since they are said to contain the system rather than to be equated with it, allowance is made for the possibility that they may incorporate elements which neither belong to it nor are essential to it” (quoted in Morton Smith, *How Is The Gold Become Dim*, p. 224). The 1972 PCUS General Assembly further stated, “none of us will traduce or use any opprobrious terms of those that differ from us in these extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrines” (Ibid.). Even though this wording is in the 1729 Adopting Act, the meaning of the words “extra-essential” and “not necessary points of doctrine” came to be so broadly interpreted that it would embrace non-Reformed doctrine and heresy. It became the agenda of the PCUS to act as if it was committed to the Westminster standards, but functionally it abandoned its foundational tenets. By its own admission, the PCUS in its later days confessed to being a loose subscriptionist denomination.

The doctrines and wording of the Westminster Standards are clear. The RPCUS expects all of its officers to give allegiance to every doctrine of every chapter of the Confession. This doctrinal allegiance applies only to elders and deacons -- not to church members. All that is required to become a member in any church of the RPCUS is to give a credible profession of faith to the church session. In essence, there is nothing extraordinary about the RPCUS’ expectations. We simply believe in subscription to our Constitution. There are undoubtedly some of our Reformed brethren who think we are too narrow because we are presuppositional, theonomic, postmillennial, and limit congregational voting to male heads of households. The RPCUS insists that these particular distinctives are not extraneous doctrines to the Standards; rather, they are the doctrines of the Standards.

A Commitment To Presuppositional Apologetics

The RPCUS advocates a presuppositional approach to apologetics in the Van Tilian tradition. The heart of presuppositional apologetics is its insistence that the debate between Christianity and all competing systems of philosophy occurs at the worldview level. Individuals always define and interpret the facts according to their governing presuppositions, i.e., their worldview. Accordingly, it is pointless to argue endlessly with the unbelievers about “the facts.” Rather, we

must challenge the foolishness of the unbeliever's philosophy of fact, his worldview. Accordingly, apologetics will always involve a debate about ultimate starting points or presuppositions. These presuppositions constitute the highest authority to which one can appeal. One's ultimate starting point is the foundation that one assumes to be true, an assumption that is often made without critical analysis or independent verification. It is one's foundational axiom.

The Christian's ultimate starting point is self-attesting Scriptures. The Scriptures are our foundational axiom. God's word must be the ultimate starting point instead of subjective human experience or the independent facts of the universe. "A presuppositional method of apologetics assumes the truth of Scripture in order to argue for the truth of Scripture. Such is unavoidable when ultimate truths are being debated" (Greg Bahnsen, *A Biblical Introduction To Apologetics*, Classroom syllabus 1976, p. 34).

One of the central issues in apologetics is the issue of certainty. Why do we believe Christianity to be the only true religion? On what basis do we believe Christianity to be true? First, Christianity can never be reduced to a probability statement. Christianity is not probably true; it is an absolute certainty. The Bible does not ask men to first establish the Bible's reliability and then put their trust in it. The Bible makes absolute demands upon man. The Bible testifies to its own authority. Our certainty rests upon the Scripture's self-attestation to its authority and truthfulness. The Bible is not open for independent verification. Van Til saw that it was sinful for man to call into question the Bible's veracity. Man must bow in humility to the Bible's authority and repent of his own autonomous thoughts.

Among some Reformed brethren, there are two other apologetic methodologies. Some are Christian rationalists, being followers of Gordon H. Clark, and others are evidentialists. For Clark, the ultimate test for truth is coherence, and undergirding this is the supremacy of the law on non-contradiction. A person chooses a self-consistent system over against a self-contradictory one (Gordon Clark, *A Christian View of Man and Things*, p.34). Clark maintained that systematic consistency is a test for revelations from God. Clark said, "If Bible doctrines are self-consistent, they have met the only legitimate test of reason. This test of logic is precisely the requirement that a set of propositions be meaningful, whether spoken by God or man" (quoted in Gilbert Weaver, *The Concept of Truth In the Apologetic Systems of Gordon Hadden Clark and Cornelius Van Til*, p.77).

Clark put great emphasis upon the use of reason, for Clark said, "The intelligibility of the Scripture presupposes logic. Therefore, anyone who is in the business of selecting first principles would seem to do better by choosing the law of non-contradiction as the axiom rather than Scripture. Scripture without logic would have no meaning" (Ronald Nash, ed. *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark*, p.64).

Regarding the issue of certainty, Clark made the following comments: "Logical consistency therefore is evidence of inspiration; but it is not demonstration. Strong accidents do happen to occur, and no proof is forthcoming that the Bible is not such an accident" (quoted in Howard F. Vos, ed. *How May I Know My Bible is Inspired, Can I trust My Bible*, p. 24).

Regarding the use of Scripture in apologetics, Clark said, "the first reason for believing the Bible is inspired is that the Bible claims to be inspired ... It is circular. We believe the Bible to be

inspired because it makes the claim, and we believe the claim because it is inspired and therefore true. This does not seem to be the right way to argue” (Ibid. p. 10). Essentially, Clark believed that the apologist’s task, in part, was to reduce anti-Christian systems to absurdity. Clark maintained that Christian propositions are consistent with each other and thereby show the validity of the axiom that Christianity is truth. Hence, logical consistency is Christianity’s test for truth. We will reserve analysis of Clark’s methodology until we have listed another major approach to apologetics.

E.J. Carnell was an advocate of another major approach to apologetics known as evidentialism. Carnell said that truth is what God says it is. How do we know when God is speaking truth? We must test truth claims to determine their validity. Regarding one’s starting point for apologetics, Carnell has said, “I have always been warmly attracted to the Cartesian starting point, for it has close affinities with my own procedure” (E.J. Carnell, *Christian Commitment*, p. 37). The Cartesian starting point is: I think therefore I am. Carnell continued, “Here is what I defend: I think therefore, I am morally obliged to admit to reality of my own existence” (Ibid).

Regarding the relationship of faith to evidences, Carnell has said, “We have defined generic faith as a resting of the mind in the sufficiency of the evidences, saving Faith is a cordial trust in the person and work of Christ. But saving faith is built on the foundation of generic faith, for we could never yield ourselves to cordial trust unless the whole man rested in the sufficiency of the evidences” (Carnell, *Christian Commitment*, p. 267). For the evidentialist, the truthfulness of the Bible rests upon the weight of evidences. For the Christian apologist, the preponderance of evidence proves Christianity to be true. Evidentialism demands that man, even non-Christian man, be the determining judge of what constitutes a legitimate proof; therefore, man is the ultimate starting point for truth, not the Scripture itself.

Having set forth three major approaches to apologetics, which one does the Westminster Standards advocate? In chapter 1 section IV, the Westminster Confession states, “The authority of the holy scriptures, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God, (who is truth itself,) the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the word of God.” The Confession goes on to describe the uniqueness of the Scriptures as being spiritual in content, possessing great doctrines, having majestic literary style, setting forth a unity of doctrine spanning all sixty –six books, which were written by different authors over centuries of time. The Confession says that these are “arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the word of God; yet, not withstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts” (Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1 section V).

The Westminster Confession clearly adopts a presuppositional approach to apologetics. The Bible’s internal testimony to its inspiration and authority is our starting point. God has sovereignly revealed Himself in its pages, and his Word exercises unquestionable authority over all men. Some might say, “The RPCUS is being rather narrow or nit-picking in what it deems as an acceptable apologetic approach.” The issue at stake is no minor one. One of the great doctrines of the Westminster Standards is that of the sovereignty of God. Man exists to bring glory to His sovereign God, and any perspective that detracts from this central point diminishes this doctrinal truth. Man’s experiences, his observations, and his reasoning can never be the

criteria upon which man stands as judge over God. Any apologetic methodology that begins with man and not with God as He is revealed in Scripture is insulting to the God of Scripture. The God of the Bible cannot come to us in any other way than that which is consistent with Himself. God has revealed Himself as the I AM THAT I AM, one who is self explanatory, one who is accountable to no one but Himself. If God chooses to reveal Himself in Scripture, then the Scripture needs no verification. The Bible's self-attesting authority demands that man submit his whole being (mind, heart, and will) to the word of God. Yes, the Bible is the most rational explanation of the universe, and the evidences or facts of the universe do point to Christianity's truthfulness. However, this alone is not what makes Christianity the only true religion. The Bible is not true because of the facts, but the facts are true because the Bible is true! An overriding doctrine of the Standards is that man, the creature, is the servant of God the creator, not vice versa. The Clarkian and evidentialist approaches to apologetics must be abandoned because they are not faithful to Scripture nor to the Confessional Standards. It is on this basis that the RPCUS insists that its officers adopt a presuppositional approach to apologetics.

The Theonomic Distinctive

A second distinguishing feature of the RPCUS is that it is a theonomic denomination. We are quite aware of the controversy in the Reformed world over this point, and we are grieved that this is even an issue, for we believe that the Scripture and the Confessional Standards are quite clear. Without discussing great detail, the debate has focused upon the continuing validity of the judicial or case laws of the Old Testament for our modern culture. The position of the RPCUS has been that it simply adopts at face value chapters 19 and 23 of the Westminster Confession of Faith pertaining to the law of God and to the civil magistrate. Several key points need to be made. First, the RPCUS adopts chapter 23 in its entirety as originally framed by the Westminster delegates. We reject the revisions to the Confession made by the Adopting Act of 1729. It took exception to section III of chapter 23 of the Westminster Confession pertaining to the duty of the civil magistrate. The Adopting Act viewed this section as extra-essential and not as a necessary point of doctrine. One problem with referring to sections of the Confession as extra-essential and not necessary is: What is the basis for determining what is not essential and necessary? A very dangerous precedent is set, and it paves the way for abandoning the doctrines of the Standards. This is what happened historically in the PCUS in its eventual slide into apostasy.

The RPCUS also sees a great error in what the Synod of New York and Philadelphia did in 1788 in amending chapter 23 of the Confession regarding the duties of the civil magistrate. It deleted portions of section III of chapter 23. The section that it deleted was: "it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God." Several Scriptural proof texts are provided by the Westminster delegates to demonstrate the legitimacy of this section. The point is: The civil magistrate, though a separate institution from the church, is still accountable to God to be as Romans 13:4 says, "a minister of God to you for good..." The civil magistrate as God's minister is commissioned to uphold the law of God as revealed in Scripture. One of the proof texts in the Confession cites King Josiah and his thorough abolishment of pagan worship centers in Israel. This section of the Confession clearly renounces the idea of religious

pluralism in a Christian culture. Non-Christian religions are not given equal footing with Christianity. In fact, they are not to be tolerated in the sense that they are not to be allowed by the state to proselytize a community.

A second point emphasized by the RPCUS is that chapter 19 section IV of the Confession is not vague or unclear in its meaning and application. The section reads, “with regard to the nation of Israel, To them also, as a body politick, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.” The controversy over the issue of theonomy revolves around the phrase, “not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.” Many in the Reformed community who oppose theonomy say, “Since the nation of Israel has expired as a political body, the judicial laws of Moses do not apply to us at all.

The theonomic position is that the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament are no longer obligatory upon God’s people. They foreshadowed the atoning work of Christ. Now that the reality has come, there is not a need for the types and shadows of the old covenant. The judicial or case laws are still to be enforced, however, for these laws are specific illustrations of how to carry out God’s moral law as summarized in the ten commandments. Greg Bahnsen, the author of *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, wrote, “The case law illustrates the applications or qualification of the principle laid down in the general commandment” (p. 313). Bahnsen further stated, “The case laws outside of the Decalogue (also called “judicial laws” in Reformed literature) are thus moral in character. Because their details are often communicated in terms of ancient Israel’s culture, these laws are not binding as such on us in today’s culture; rather, we are now required to keep the underlying principle (or “general equity”) of these laws” (Greg Bahnsen, “God’s Law and Gospel Prosperity: A Reply to the Editor of the Presbyterian Journal,” p. 15).

Accordingly, the phrase, “general equity,” in the Westminster Confession indicates that the underlying principle of the case law is what is obligatory upon us today. Bahnsen has said, “Likewise, as an application of the sixth commandment, “Thou shall not kill” the law of God required Israelites to place a fencing around the roofs of their houses. The underlying principle of this law still applies to us today, even though we may not apply it to entertaining on flat roofs since this is not part of our cultural experience; instead we might apply it today by placing a fence around our backyard swimming pools - again, in order to protect human life and thus obey the general precept of God’s law” (Ibid. p.14).

The meaning of “general equity” is not open to a variance of meaning or application. The meaning of words must always be understood in the historical context in which they are found. How did the English Puritans who wrote the Confession understand the meaning of these words? How did the American Puritans understand their meaning and application? We need to let the authors of the Confession speak for themselves, and then the mystery of the debate over theonomy should be over! The theonomic position should not be seen as an ethical innovation. It is a restatement of standard Puritan and Reformed thought.

One of the most important works done in recent time is Martin A. Foulner’s book, *Theonomy and the Westminster Confession*, published in 1997. Foulner has given us a masterful compilation of quotes by the English and American Puritans, which forever settles the issue from

an historical and scholarly point of view. The Puritans of the 17th Century were theonomists! Who better to give us an understanding of the meaning of chapter 19 of the Confession than those English Puritans who attended the Westminster Assembly and helped formulate the wording of the Confession? Two notable delegates of the Westminster Assembly were George Gillespie and Samuel Rutherford. Regarding the applicability of the Mosaic judicial law, Gillespie said, "I heartily yield that a lawful magistrate, whether Christian or heathen, ought to be a keeper or guardian of both tables; and as God's viceregent, hath authority to punish heinous sins against either table, by civil or corporal punishments, which proves nothing against a distinct church government for keeping pure the ordinances of Christ" (George Gillespie, *Aaron's Rod Blossoming; or, the Divine Ordinances of Church Government Vindicated*, 1646 as quoted in Martin Foulner's *Theonomy and the Westminster Confession*, p. 14).

Samuel Rutherford, another delegate of the Westminster Assembly, used language similar to that of the Confession when he wrote, "It is clear the question must be thus stated, for all the lawes of the old Testament (which we hold in their morall equite to be perpetual) that are touching blasphemies, heresies, solicitation to worship false Gods and the breach of which the Godly Magistrate was to punish, command or forbid onely such things as may be proved by two or three witnesses..." (Samuel Rutherford, *A Free Disputation Against Pretended Liberty of Conscience*, p. 47 as quoted in Foulner, p. 16).

In 1649 the Commissioners of the Westminster Assembly wrote *A Solemn Testimony Against Toleration*. In it they said, "For it cannot be shown that any part of that power which magistrates had under the Old Testament is repealed under the new, neither can any convincing reason be brought, why it should be of narrower extent now nor then. Are not blasphemies, heresies and errors dishonourable to God, and destructive unto souls as well now as of old?" (Quoted in Foulner, p. 33).

In his book, *Theonomy and the Westminster Confession*, Foulner quotes from other English Puritans who attended the Westminster Assembly and who believed in carrying out the punishments of the Mosaic judicial laws. These other Puritans were Jeremiah Burroughs, Herbert Palmer, William Reyner, Richard Vines, Thomas Hodges, and Philip Nye.

In keeping with Puritan tradition, the RPCUS affirms that the Westminster Standards are theonomic documents; therefore, nothing short of affirming the general theonomic position is acceptable for all officers of the RPCUS. In saying this, we need to clarify a very important point. The RPCUS endorses theonomy as it is stated in chapters 19 and 23 of the original Confession. There are some theonomists today who believe the dietary laws of the Old Testament are still operative; however, this is a position not held by many other theonomists. The predominant opinion of these is that the dietary laws fall more under the ceremonial law than they do under the judicial laws. Moreover, there is sometimes difference of opinion among theonomists in how the principles of the case laws should be enforced. For example, are federal regulatory agencies such as the FAA and OSHA legitimate applications of the principles of the case laws of the Old Testament. Some theonomists have said "yes" and others "no." Herein is a certain latitude of differing thought within the overall theonomic position.

The RPCUS, as a presbyterial examination body, wants to hear from a prospective officer that he endorses the basic theonomic position of the Westminster Confession as stated in chapter 19

section IV. The presbytery often asks further questions of the candidate to determine what he understands to be the meaning of “general equity.” If the candidate says, “I believe the Mosaic civil or judicial laws are still valid in the application of their basic principle,” then this would be considered as an acceptable answer.

The Postmillennial Distinctive

A third distinctive of the RPCUS is that we are a postmillennial denomination. We do not practice eschatological liberty because the Westminster Standards do not allow such liberty. Again, the operating principle of the RPCUS is that we subscribe to all the doctrines of every chapter of the Confession. All forms of premillennialism are unacceptable viewpoints. Dispensational premillennialism is fundamentally out of accord with the Standards by espousing a view that denies covenant theology, which is the clear position of the Standards. Historic premillennialism is out of accord due to the following reasons: 1) It believes that the kingdom of God in its fullest sense will not be present on earth until Christ’s second coming when He establishes an earthly reign of at least a thousand years. 2) It believes that the effects of the gospel will not bring about worldwide conversion and cultural renewal. It believes that the world is steadily getting worse, culminating in a great apostasy, the rise of the antichrist, and the Great Tribulation at the end of the church age. 3) It believes in two bodily resurrections. The first, commonly called the Rapture, occurs at Jesus’ second coming. The second bodily resurrection, commonly known as the Great White Throne Judgment, occurs at the end of the millennial reign of Christ.

Where are the tenants of historic premillennialism out of accord with the Westminster Standards? The Confession and Larger Catechism do not differentiate as separate events the second coming of Christ, the last day, and the great day of judgment. All these events are contemporaneous, meaning that these are all facets of one great event. There are not two bodily resurrections but only one, and there is no time separation between these events such as a thousand-year reign of Christ. Chapter 32 sections II and III of the Westminster Confession refer to the last day as the day of resurrection for both the righteous and unrighteous. Chapter 33 speaks of the Day of Judgment where the righteous and the unrighteous will be judged. Chapter 33 section III associates this great Day of Judgment with Christ’s Second Coming. Larger Catechism question # 87 states, “What are we to believe concerning the resurrection? Part of the answer states, “We are to believe, that at the last day there shall be a general resurrection of the dead,... both of the just and unjust: when they that are then found alive shall in a moment be changed...” The answer to Larger Catechism question # 88 refers to the day of resurrection, the Day of Judgment, and Christ’s Second Coming as one event. Question # 88 states, “What shall immediately follow after the resurrection?” The answer states, “Immediately after the resurrection shall follow the general and final judgment of angels and men; the day and hour whereof no man knoweth, that all may watch and pray, and be ever ready for the coming of the Lord.”

Shorter Catechism question # 28 asks, “Wherein consisteth Christ’s exaltation? The answer states, “Christ’s exaltation consisteth in His rising again from the dead on the third day, in ascending up into heaven, in sitting at the right hand of God the Father, and in coming to judge the world at the last day.” We can see that the Shorter Catechism links Christ’s coming and His judgment of the world with the last day.

Larger Catechism question and answer # 56 links Christ's coming with the last day, which is also the Day of Judgment. The question states, "How is Christ to be exalted in his coming again to judge the world?" The answer states, "Christ is to be exalted in his coming again to judge the world, in that he, who was unjustly judged and condemned by wicked men, shall come again at the last day in great power, and in the full manifestation of his own glory, and of his Father's, with all his holy angels, with a shout with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, to judge the world in righteousness." Historic premillennialism has always associated I Thessalonians 4:16 with the Rapture, where Christ descends with a shout, with a voice of an archangel, and with a trumpet. Yet, the Rapture is supposedly separated from the Day of Judgment by at least a thousand years. The Larger Catechism refutes this notion, and it emphatically states that Christ, "shall come again at the last day in great power..." Moreover, the Catechism states that Christ is exalted "in his coming again to judge the world." Hence, the Second Coming and the great Day of Judgment are one event!

Amillennialists would agree with every correction that we have pointed out with reference to the premillennialists. There are great similarities between amillennialists and postmillennialists, but the basic difference between the two is paramount and is of such magnitude that an amillennialist would not pass a theological exam in the RPCUS. While the amillennialist does believe that Jesus is presently reigning in this age, he is essentially pessimistic in his view of history. He does not believe that the gospel will prosper in bringing about the Christianization of the world. He believes that culture will continue to decline, leading to a great apostasy which culminates in Christ's Second Coming at the end of this millennial age.

Some might say that the RPCUS' postmillennial position is too dogmatic and too narrow in denying amillennialists entrance into the denomination. Yet, the distinguishing mark of postmillennial eschatology is central. It believes in the victory of the gospel in space and time during the present millennial age. The Great Commission of Christ in Matthew 28:18-20 will be accomplished in history prior to Christ's Second Coming. The knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea as promised in Isaiah 11:9 and in Habakkuk 2:14. King Jesus will take possession of His inheritance as was promised Him by the Father in Psalm 2:7,8. Verse 8 says, "Ask of Me and I will surely give the nations as Thine inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Thy possession." From His ascended throne in heaven, King Jesus exercises His kingly reign by subduing His enemies, making them a footstool for His feet just as Hebrews 10:12,13 says, "but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet."

The postmillennialist asks every amillennialist, "How can a sovereign God, who has foreordained the end from the beginning and who has all power, ever lose?" The Great Commission is not the foreordination of defeat but of victory. This optimism is seen in the Larger Catechism question and answer # 54, "How is Christ exalted in his sitting at the right hand of God?" Part of the answer states, "Christ...doth gather and defend his church, and subdue their enemies;..." Shorter Catechism question # 26 asks, "How does Christ execute the office of a king?" The answer is: "Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies." One of the proof texts given by the Westminster delegates on this question and answer is Psalm 110 and I

Corinthians 15:25. The Corinthian passage says, “For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet.”

Larger Catechism question # 191 states, “What do we pray for in the second petition?” The answer is: “In the second petition, (which is, Thy kingdom come,) acknowledging ourselves and all mankind to be by nature under the dominion of sin and Satan, we pray, that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fulness of the Gentiles brought in, the church furnished with gospel officers and ordinances, purged from corruption,....”

This portion of the Lord’s prayer is unquestionably postmillennial. A prayer for the kingdom of sin and Satan to be destroyed is a prayer for the victory of the gospel in the millennial age. Since the first promise of the Messiah in Genesis 3:15, there has been enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. We know the seed of the woman (Christ and His seed, i.e., his people) shall have ultimate victory over the seed of the serpent (Satan and His seed, i.e., his followers). We know that the woman’s seed is the church of Christ, all the elect of God, and the serpent’s seed is all the reprobate, the children of the Devil. In Genesis 22:17 we have the promise that Abraham’s seed will possess the gates of their enemies. Galatians 3:29 identifies the church as the seed of Abraham. To possess an enemy’s gate is to conquer one’s enemy. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus promised His church that the gates of Hell would not be able to withstand the assault of the church. From II Corinthians 10:3-5 we learn that the church has divinely empowered spiritual weapons for the destruction of fortresses. The church destroys ungodly speculations and brings all thoughts captive to Christ’s obedience. We know that Jesus’ millennial reign shall be victorious as noted by Psalm 2; Psalm 110; I Corinthians 15:20-28; Hebrews 10:12,13; and Ephesians 1:20-23. Since prayer is a means ordained by God to bring about His sovereign decrees, would God have us pray for something that He does not intend to accomplish? Of course not!

When we are commanded to pray that the gospel be propagated throughout the world, we are praying that the gospel accomplish its intended purpose – that of the Christianization of the world’s nations. This is the promise of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. In verse 18 Jesus said that he possessed all authority in heaven and earth. In light of this fact, Jesus commanded His church to go and make disciples of the world’s nations. Since Jesus said that he would be with the church to the end of the world, this means that His sovereign power would always be energizing His church to fulfill her task.

The prayer for the Jews to be called to Christ is a fulfillment of what was promised in Romans 11:26 that all ethnic Israel would be saved, that she, the natural branch, would be grafted back onto the tree. The prayer that the fullness of the Gentiles be brought in is a prayer for the Christianization of the world in accord with Matthew 28:18-20 and what was promised in Psalm 22:27,28 that all the families of the nations will worship God. It is also a prayer for the fulfillment of the promise in Isaiah 2:2-4 that the peoples of the earth will stream to the mountain of the house of the Lord to learn the ways of Jehovah, and the nations will beat their weapons of war into tools of productivity to the glory of God.

The Westminster Standards are postmillennial. What the RPCUS wants to hear from its candidates is that they believe in the success of the gospel during the millennial age before the Second Coming of Christ.

Congregational Voting By Male Heads of Households

The fourth distinguishing characteristic of the RPCUS is that we believe that only male heads of households have a right to vote in a congregational meeting. The RPCUS believes that other Presbyterian and Reformed denominations do not go far enough in limiting the role of women in the church. I Corinthians 14:34,35 states, “Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.” The text is clear that women are prohibited in speaking in church worship services. If they have theological questions they are to look to their own husbands. The governing principle is that they are to be in subjection. To speak in worship is not to be in subjection. The contrast is clear in the passage – “for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves,...” I Timothy 2:11-14 gives a similar admonition – “Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression.”

Many denominations have correctly understood this passage as a prohibition against women officers (teaching and ruling elders and deacons). However, they have fallen short of its total prohibition. A congregational vote is an exercise of rule in the church. It is an exercise of ecclesiastical power. One of the foremost responsibilities of a congregation meeting is the selection of church officers, from the pastor to ruling elders and to deacons. This selection has tremendous and long term affects in the ministry of any particular church. The selection of officers is probably the most important decision in the life of any church. Since it is not unusual for women to constitute a greater number of communing or voting members in a church, this means that women can out vote the male members and determine who is to be church officers. It is not uncommon for Presbyterian pulpit committees (a committee selected by the congregation to locate prospective pastors and bring recommendations to the congregation for a vote) to be comprised of at least one woman. This means the woman’s vote carries even more power, seeing that the pulpit committee is not that large. The ability to select one man over another as a church officer is an exercise of authority or rule in the church. It is totally out of accord with biblical admonitions that the women are to be submissive to men and remain quiet in church. I Corinthians 11:3 is very forthright in the line of authority – “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.” The principle of submission is magnificently brought out in I Peter 3:5,6 regarding the submission of wives to their husbands – “For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.” Yes, this context along with I Corinthians 11 has primary reference to the relationship of husbands and wives; however, the principle of womanly submission to male headship is not totally restricted to the marriage relationship, for we noted earlier that Paul’s prohibition against women having authority over men is also grounded in the

principle of submission. Note carefully that Paul prefaces this prohibition by I Timothy 2:11 which says, “Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness.” For a woman to possess the power of a congregational vote is totally inconsistent with the cultivation and manifestation of submission to male headship in the life of the church.

The question might be raised by some, “The RPCUS has sought to give a biblical defense of their prohibition against women’s suffrage, but where in the Westminster Standards is this position defended?” First, any doctrine that is biblical is also a doctrine that is either explicitly or implicitly set forth in the Standards. As we examine the Westminster Standards, we will find no explicit chapter or catechism question and answer dealing with the issue of women’s suffrage in the life of the church, but we should not be misled to think that the issue is not addressed in some form. For example, we do not find any explicit mention in the Westminster Standards prohibiting women from holding church office. Are we to interpret this to mean that the Standards do not have a position regarding this issue? In the historical context, this was not an issue. However, the Westminster Standards are not completely silent regarding the role of women in the church. We can implicitly build a case by looking at the Scriptural proof texts given in the document entitled, *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government.*” In the section of this document dealing with pastors, we find the following comments concerning the public reading of the Scriptures: “That the priests and Levites in the Jewish church were entrusted with the public reading of the word is proved. That the ministers of the gospel have as ample a charge and commission to dispense the word, as well as other ordinances, as the priests and Levites had under the law, proved, Isa. Lxvi. 21. Matt. xxiii. 34 where our Saviour entitleth the officers of the New Testament, whom he will send forth, by the same names of the teachers of the Old.” It is clear from this statement that a parallel is being drawn between the priests and Levites of the Old Testament with ministers of the gospel in the New Testament. Obviously, there are dissimilarities between the two groups, but there are similarities as well. The similarities are addressed in the proof texts. Deuteronomy 31:9-11 and I Timothy 3:2 are cited. In these two proof texts, we find that Moses wrote the law, giving it to the priests, the sons of Levi for them to publicly read to the congregation of Israel. We are told in I Timothy 3:2 that one of the qualifications for an elder is that, if he is married, he is to be the husband of one wife. Hence, we see that the Westminster Standards do implicitly teach from their proof texts that only males are to hold church office.

In *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government*, we read in the section on ordination the following definition: “Ordination is the solemn setting apart of a person to some publick church office.” The proof text given for this point is Numbers 8:10-22. This portion of Scripture deals with the presentation of the Levites to the Lord for their priestly service. Numbers 8:9,10 reads, “So you shall present the Levites before the tent of meeting. You shall also assemble the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, and present the Levites before the Lord; and the *sons of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites.*” Only the male representatives were engaged in setting apart other males for religious service. Keil and Delitzsch state in their commentary on Numbers, “Moses was then to cause them to draw near before the tabernacle, *i.e.*, to enter the court, and to gather together the whole congregation of Israel, *viz.*, in the persons of their heads and representatives. After this the Levites were to come before Jehovah, *i.e.*, in front of the altar; and the children of Israel, *i.e.*, the tribe princes in the name of the Israelites, were to lay their hands upon them.....that by this symbolic act they might transfer to the Levites the obligation resting upon the whole nation to serve the Lord in the persons of its first born sons, and might present

them to the Lord as representatives of the first born of Israel, to serve Him as living sacrifices” (*Commentary on the Old Testament*, p. 48).

It is vital to note that the phrase “the whole congregation” is expressed in terms of male heads who laid hands on other male representatives for religious service. This principle is carried forward into the New Testament in the ordination of ministers of the gospel. *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* states, “Every minister of the Word is to be ordained by imposition of hands, and prayer, with fasting, by those preaching presbyters to whom it doth belong.” If church elders, who are to be males, are installing other elders into church office by the laying on of hands, it is totally inconsistent to imagine women have any part in the selection of these elders by a congregational vote. The problem with our churches is that they seem to think that the existence of women’s suffrage in the broader society must or should be exercised in the church. The legitimacy of women’s suffrage in the civil realm is an equally important issue that should be given a biblical critique, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to give such an assessment.

It is interesting to note the impact of this view upon women in the RPCUS. This author has talked with women in our churches about the prohibition of female voting in congregational meetings. They did not view this prohibition as an act of tyranny or as an attempt to control or subjugate the women in the church. Some said that they viewed this prohibition as a blessing in that they felt relieved of the burden of responsibility that more properly belongs to their husbands.

The point is: Church sessions, don’t be afraid to enact this policy. If your church is grounded in the Word of God, your women will desire faithful male headship in all areas of life, including local congregational life. Regardless of what you think the response of the women in your church will be, you must act biblically. Be courageous, and the Lord will honor you.

Conclusion

The RPCUS views itself as a denomination in the great tradition of Southern Presbyterianism. We do not believe that we are the only legitimate Presbyterian denomination, but we do believe that God has raised us up to be guardians of a special treasure -- the Westminster Standards. We believe that they set forth the system of doctrine taught by the Bible. We believe that strict subscription to them is expected of a confessional or creedal church. Strict subscription extends to every doctrine in every chapter of the Confession. We are as narrow or restrictive as the wording of the Confession of Faith. We do say to all our Reformed brothers, “Come, join us, and stand with us as together we champion the causes of King Jesus.