

THE STANDARDS AS HOMILETIC TOOLS

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Confessional churches often take for granted that the person in the pew fully understands and adheres to their creeds and confessions. However, that assumption has cost Presbyterians and other confessional denominations their spiritual lives throughout history. As a typical example, the New Side/Old Side controversy in the Presbyterian Church crippled the spiritual fervor and testimony of the church while laity sat placidly by believing all was well. That controversy is still impacting us today. If we learn to use the Westminster Standards properly, by god's grace we may avoid the error and divisiveness of past generations.

The pulpit ministry should strive to link its doctrine clearly to "the faith once for all delivered unto the saints." A. A. Hodge posits four reasons for the use of creeds and standards: first, "to mark, disseminate, and preserve the attainments made in the knowledge of Christian truth;" second, "to discriminate the truth" from falsehood; third, "to act as the basis for ecclesiastical fellowship;" and fourth, to aid in "popular instruction."¹ Keeping your congregation aware of their moorings can hinder cults and erroneous doctrine from making inroads into a congregation, and benefit you as well. As you prepare, your thinking will be kept in a consistently orthodox track, preventing you from taking off on tangents or buying into error and heresy.

Like any other tool, however, the Standards need to be used properly to receive the most benefit from them. If employed too zealously, they can create the pharisaic problem that Jesus denounced, namely, substituting the traditions of men for the revelation of God.² Several cautions, then, are in order as we consider the relationship of the standards to the Scriptures. Paul's second Epistle to Timothy, 3:16, is helpful at this point. It is "all *scripture*" that is profitable and edifying. Not that men's traditions can never be profitable, but they are useful only to the degree that they accurately reflect the teaching of Scripture. Therefore, the Standards should never be used as preaching texts, nor should they be offered as the sole proof or support for a doctrinal point. To do so would clearly say to a congregation that the Standards are on a par with Holy Writ, in spite of your intentions to the contrary.

Furthermore, while the interpretive tradition found in our Standards is certainly worthy and biblically grounded, it is not inspired, and its authority is granted it by *fiat*. Indeed, as the centuries passed, church traditions have changed on certain points, sometimes by deliberate effort. An example is the *filioque* issue spoken to in chapter 2, section 3 of the Confession of Faith. None of the early creeds of the Church declared the Holy Spirit to be proceeding from both the Father and the Son. However, in the late fifth century, the Bishop of Toledo decided to read John 15:26 in that way, despite all preceding arguments against such an interpretation, and he arbitrarily added the phrase "and the Son" to the Nicene Creed. Enough people in the Western Church grabbed onto the idea so that it managed to stick, despite the protestations of Western

¹*The Confession of Faith*, reprint edition, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), pp. 2, 3. Robert L. Dabney also provides an excellent discussion on this point in his pamphlet *The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession*, reprint edition, (Greenville, SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1993), pp. 13-22.

²Matthew 15:3-9; compare also Colossians 2:8.

popes and Eastern patriarchs alike.³ Our confession kept that tradition, which by the time of Westminster was accepted so widely in the West that few considered it an issue. The point here is not to argue the controversy all over again, but merely to note that interpretations *are* reflected in the Standards and should cause us to exercise caution when searching those documents for “proof” for our teaching. Just as a dictionary does not determine the meaning of words, but rather records how words are commonly used, so the Westminster Standards do not determine or prove our theology. They do, however, clearly explicate how theology is understood and applied by those of us who claim them.

Therefore, to use the Standards properly we must follow the rules for the effective employment of support material. The purpose of using support material in any speech or document is to clarify, amplify, apply, and/or demonstrate whatever point is at hand. Two words govern the choices we make in this area: *variety* and *balance*. Variety in types and sources of support demonstrates a broad basis of acceptance for the ideas you are trying to convey (the need for this demonstration increases with resistance to the teaching). Support material may take the form of stories (either real or fictitious), examples, comparisons/contrasts, analogies, quotations, statistics, and visual aids, among others. Balance comes in to moderate variety. Choose the best support for the point, and limit how much support you have for each point to what is needed for understanding and conviction. Take care that the support does not overshadow the point and become the message. Choose quality over quantity. Overkill will just make your congregation tired. The more an idea is accepted, the less support you need for it.

Finally, a few thoughts need to be mentioned about quotations, since this is the form of support material the Standards will usually take. Use direct quotations if the meaning is clear as written. Paraphrase if necessary (and indicate that you are doing so), but carefully so as not to alter the meaning. Be so familiar with the quotation that you can maintain a semblance of eye contact with your congregation to gauge their attention and understanding. Most importantly, avoid lengthy quotations (more than two or three lines). Summarize longer passages. If you do not, you will lose your congregation: remember, they only have one shot at hearing what you have been studying all week. Also, reading long passages runs the risk of introducing ideas foreign to the point you are trying to make, thereby fragmenting your listener’s attention.

Used properly in the pulpit and in other facets of church work, the Westminster Standards can be a great help toward the goal of equipping our congregations to do the work of the ministry.⁴ May God help us to that end.

³Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd edition, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 23-26.

⁴Ephesians 4:11-13