

# Solid Ground: Standing for the Standards

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Doubtless, we are all aware of the growing polarization characteristic of our current cultural moment. The Left and the Right appeal to the politics of fear in an attempt to drive us towards proposals at the polar extremes. For many, the demonization of the opposition is too tempting a strategy to resist. Sometimes a sad necessity of language, they nevertheless allow us to summarize and identify a party or a position without the tiresome repetition of all the elements involved. But today, more often than not, derogatory labels are hurled at political opponents in the hopes that some of the muck will stick.

As the 46<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PCA approaches, I'm more conscious than ever of the brinksmanship which is so often a feature of our political discourse replicating itself in the life of the church. Do not misunderstand: I have no interest in advocating for a mushy middle way. An insincere, "bless-your-heart" niceness helps no one. Papering over the cracks where real differences lie is dangerous. Cracks often reveal a problem at the foundation. If the house is to stand secure, we must not ignore the warning signs. So, I have

no desire to see us pretend that all is well if mutually incompatible philosophies of ministry or theological convictions continue to divide us. This isn't an exhortation to simply "play nice" at GA.

But it *is* a plea for a *tertium quid*. It is a plea for what I'll call "simple confessionalism". Neither blindly traditional, nor unquestioningly trendy, I believe that to stand with the Westminster Standards places us neither on the Left nor on the Right. Sometimes I wonder, as I listen to debates around the Church, if we have forgotten that the Westminster Standards express the convictions of the central ground, the main stream of the Presbyterian Church across the ages and around the world. Understanding that fact alone should change my tone and alter my posture.

I will not concede that a commitment to the theology and piety of our Standards is narrow, or right wing, or conservative. I will not relegate the core of Presbyterian identity to a party-political platform. To stand where our Confession and Catechisms stand is to dwell in the broad central plain that forms the historic heartland of Presbyterian conviction.

But I fear that an unapologetic and cheerful confessionalism is becoming an increasingly uncomfortable stance to adopt in our Church. Those who view the Standards with impatience too glibly characterize those whose faith is expressed in their language as rightwing and hardline. Those who are in fact hardline and narrow-minded tend to agree. We all know some doctrinal vigilantes who delight in nothing so much as the opportunity to pounce on an ill phrased expression during a credentials exam. We've all heard the prophets of impending denominational doom who seem to find reasons for melancholy in every action of the General Assembly. These men *love* to be considered confessional. It validates their grumpiness and justifies their gloom. Meanwhile, those who view our Standards as a constricting theological straight-jacket delight to link confessionalism with that kind of crankiness. After all, who would want to be identified as confessional, if *that's* what it produces!

But both groups miss the mark. If you stand where the Westminster Confession and Catechisms stand, do not adopt the posture of a minority report. There is no need to be defensive. We are not outliers. No, the Standards express the heartbeat of Presbyterian doctrine and devotion. The Standards need no apology. Let us have confidence in our Confession and Catechisms, and in the constitution of our Church, built to reflect a polity and a piety consistent with our Standards. Let us cheerfully expect everyone in every court of the church to adhere to the teaching of the Scriptures summarized so very well by our Confession. After all, exceptions by definition ought not to be a norm. They ought to be exceptional. At presbytery, there should be surprise when an exception is taken, not suspicion when none is offered. In our pulpits the patterns of truth so carefully articulated in our Catechisms ought to be commended to our people and shown to be the clear teaching of the Word of God.

If the Westminster Standards become mere shibboleths, used only to screen for heresy in a credentials exam, we have lost our way. If insisting on the Westminster Standards generates impatience in our hearts, we have lost our way. If we counsel ordinands to learn the Standards- but only as a hoop through which they must jump to get to the stuff in ministry that really matters- we have lost our way. Instead, let's stand where our Standards put us: right in the heart of what it means to be Reformed and Evangelical Christians. And let's work to adopt a posture in the courts of the church and in the life of our congregations that reflects that.



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