

William Perkins & Liberty of Conscience: May a Pastor Teach His Differences from the Church's Doctrinal Standards?

By Jacob D. Gerber

In *After Virtue*, ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre observed that “conceptual incommensurability” undermines many modern debates. This incommensurability arises out of divergent claims of what is “good,” where arguments from different sides appeal to “rival premises” for which “we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one as against another. For each premise employs some quite different normative or evaluative concept from the others, so that the claims made upon us are of quite different kinds.”¹ That is, our debates often feel incapable of resolution because we struggle to compare *apple* values against *orange* values. So, while we may be able to define what makes for a good/better/best apple, or a good/better/best orange, the different “normative or evaluative concepts” involved in each respective judgment do not allow us easily to compare and prioritize the relative value between an apple and an orange. Therefore, in our debates about important, disputed issues, we struggle to adjudicate between competing concepts of the “good” according to any “unsailable criteria,” lacking any “set of compelling reasons by means of which we may convince our opponents.”²

MacIntyre then argued that, as a result of this incommensurability, people often resort to making decisions according to philosophical *emotivism*, “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.”³ For this reason, many arguments that masquerade as serious moral philosophy may have an internal coherence, but their first principles ultimately depend on aesthetic taste and preferences rather than any objective criteria of judgment.⁴

One niche manifestation of “conceptual incommensurability” has arisen throughout the history of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) as the denomination has wrestled with the question of whether

teaching elders may teach the stated doctrinal differences that presbyteries grant to them as approved exceptions. To answer this question, some have appealed to the absolute right to liberty of conscience, as enshrined in the First Preliminary Principle of the PCA's *Book of Church Order (BCO)*:

God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from any doctrines or commandments of men (a) which are in any respect contrary to the Word of God, or (b) which, in regard to matters of faith and worship, are not governed by the Word of God. Therefore, the rights of private judgment in all matters that respect religion are universal and inalienable. No religious constitution should be supported by the civil power further than may be necessary for protection and security equal and common to all others. (BCO PP #1)

Others have instead appealed to the Second Preliminary Principle, which affirms the right of the church to protect its peace and purity by setting its own terms for membership and ministers:

In perfect consistency with the above principle, every Christian Church, or union or association of particular

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1. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 8.

2. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 8.

3. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 11–12.

4. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 40; for more recent examples of the ongoing role of emotional preferences in contemporary ethical debates, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), pp. 376–77.

churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ has appointed. In the exercise of this right it may, notwithstanding, err in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet even in this case, it does not infringe upon the liberty or the rights of others, but only makes an improper use of its own. (*BCO PP #2*)

These Preliminary Principles have served as philosophical and theological foundations for Presbyterians since they were adopted by the American Presbyterian church as far back as 1788.⁵ Even so, the two values can feel incommensurable when we seek to relate, compare, and prioritize the value of one against the other on specific questions—including the question of whether a teaching elder may teach his doctrinal differences. It is worth noting that the framers of these preliminary principles seem to have felt this tension, prompting them to state explicitly that the second principle is to be understood in “perfect consistency” with the first.

The most recent example of the difficulty of applying these two principles consistently arose at the 46th and 47th General Assemblies of the PCA, when the report from the Committee on the Review of Presbyterian Records (CRPR) recommended an exception of substance in response to a Presbytery’s preventing a teacher elder from teaching his approved doctrinal exceptions. CRPR argued—and those General Assemblies agreed—that prohibiting a teaching elder “from teaching his accepted view” was “contrary to our practice of good faith subscription and the first preliminary principle.”⁶ In defense of the presbytery’s actions, a minority report from CRPR to the 46th General Assembly, as well as the presbytery’s responses to the 47th and 48th

General Assemblies regarding that exception of substance, all appealed to the Second Preliminary Principle.⁷ Those arguments ultimately persuaded the 48th General Assembly to reverse the judgments of the 46th and 47th General Assemblies by adopting another minority report from CRPR which argued that “Restricting the teaching of exceptions does not meet the definition of what it means to bind the conscience.”⁸ How could three General Assemblies come to opposite conclusions about the same question?

In these debates, the two values enshrined in the First and Second Preliminary Principles seemed incommensurable, in spite of the *BCO*’s insistence that they are in “perfect consistency” with each other. How do we judge where the rights of the individual end and the rights of the Church begin (or, *vice versa*)? Presbyters on both sides of the debate have sometimes talked past each other, some appealing strenuously to the First, and others to the Second. How, then, do presbyters judge such cases on anything more than the emotivism of personal preference? Are the decisions of the General Assemblies purely subject to the whims of whichever side has more advocates in attendance? Presbyterians work to establish clear principles (e.g., the Preliminary Principles) to guide their decisions on any number of issues; however, on this issue, the PCA has struggled to coordinate these two seemingly incommensurable values.

In this paper, I will show how a perception of the incommensurability of values have led the PCA’s courts and presbyters sometimes to lean more on the First Preliminary Principle’s emphasis on liberty of individual conscience, and other times on the Second’s emphasis on the protection of the purity of the Church. Further, I will show how attempts to articulate principles to allow for direct comparison and prioritization of these values have so far been unsuccessful. While most of the discussions on this topic have appealed to voices, debates, and decisions from within American Presbyterianism, I will consider the question of whether a Presbyterian pastor may teach his doctrinal exceptions in light of the teaching of William Perkins (1558–1602) on the nature and function of the conscience. Perkins was known as “the father of Puritanism,” and he was a foundational thinker on the development of the Reformed doctrine of the liberty of conscience. Perkins’s work on the conscience has received extensive attention; however, the literature on confessional subscription and the question of whether a pastor may teach doctrinal exceptions has largely neglected Perkins’s contributions. In this paper, I will argue that Perkins gives clarity to answer the question of whether a pastor may teach his doctrinal

5. Appendix A: “Preliminary Principles Adopted in 1788 by the Synods and Adapted by the First American General Assembly in 1789,” in Robert C. Cannada and W. Jack Williamson, *The Historic Polity of the PCA* (Greenville, SC: A Press, 1997), p. 49.

6. *Minutes of the 46th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2018)*, p. 367; *Minutes of the 47th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2019)*, pp. 450–52.

7. “Minority Report On Recommendation #3: Calvary Presbytery,” in *M46GA*, p. 369; “Response [2019],” in *M47GA*, pp. 450–51; “Response [2020],” in *Minutes of the 48th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2021)*, pp. 531–34.

8. *M48GA*, pp. 630–33. The author was a co-author of this minority report.

exceptions by identifying the significance and role of the public conscience of the Church (see fn 11). To make this case, I will begin by summarizing the history of the PCA's debate about whether a teaching elder may teach his doctrinal exceptions. Then, I will outline Perkins's view of liberty of conscience and the binding of conscience, especially in relation to confessional statements, and how those views help to shape an understanding of the mind and conscience of the Church. Finally, I will offer a few conclusions about how Perkins's views of conscience may help the PCA to move forward with the debate.

THE HISTORY OF THE DEBATE ABOUT TEACHING DOCTRINAL EXCEPTIONS IN THE PCA

In understanding the history of debate on whether Presbyterian teaching elders may teach their stated differences from the Church's doctrinal standards, we must first consider a brief overview on the development of the doctrine of the liberty of conscience and the relationship of that doctrine to the question of confessional subscription that took place prior to the founding of the PCA. Then, I will give a more extensive treatment of how this question has been handled since the founding of the PCA, both by official court actions as well as by individual voices within the PCA.

LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE AND CONFESSATIONAL SUBSCRIPTION BEFORE THE FOUNDING OF THE PCA

The conscience received minimal attention in the early and medieval church.⁹ During the Reformation and post-Reformation eras, however, conscience became a central issue. Martin Luther had famously insisted upon the importance of the conscience in his defense of his position during the Diet of Worms in 1521.¹⁰ John Calvin also considered questions about freedom of conscience.¹¹ Early Reformed confessional statements such as the Belgic Confession (1561; Art. 23, 24, 32, 37) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563; Qs. #32, 60) deal with the question of conscience only incidentally. Later, however, the doctrine of liberty of conscience received much more expansive confessional treatment in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF; 1647), which dedicates an entire chapter to the subject "Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience" (WCF 20).

The Puritans bridged the more basic articulation of the liberty of conscience in earlier Reformation thinking, and the full articulation of the doctrine in the post-Reformation *Westminster Confession of Faith*. To greater extent than the original Reformers, the Puritans

developed a clear theological understanding of the relationship between conscience and the Word of God, making conscience "a tremendous and inescapable reality to the Puritans."¹² We will examine the work of William Perkins on the subject of the conscience more closely later in this article, but it is helpful to give a few comments here to situate him within the history of the development of the doctrine, because his role in the development of this doctrine was unique among his peers and particularly important.¹³ One of his main contributions was to recognize that the "role of conscience" should not be restricted "to the difficult or doubtful cases; it has a part to play in every truly human action."¹⁴ Additionally, L. John Van Til suggests that one of Perkins's most significant contributions was

9. For a survey, see Gary Brady, "A Study of Ideas of the Conscience in Puritan Writings 1590–1640" (Master of Theology Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2006), pp. 11–16.

10. Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993); Yi-Jye Wang, "A Call from a Freed Conscience: Rise and Fall of Religious Leniency in Martin Luther's Thought" (ThM Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2017); Micah S. Meek, "The Development of the Concept of the Conscience from Luther to Anglican Puritanism," *PRJ* 10.2 (2018): 47–63.

11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas MacNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), see esp. pp. 833–49 (§3.19); pp. 1205–10 (§4.10.27–32); Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*; Constance Y. Lee, "The Spark That Still Shines: John Calvin on Conscience and Natural Law," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 8 (2019): 615–40; Timothy R. Scheuers, *Consciences and the Reformation: Scruples over Oaths and Confessions in the Era of Calvin and His Contemporaries*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). For the phrase "public conscience," see *ibid.*, p. 134.

12. Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, "The Puritans on Conscience," in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), p. 909; see also Richard A. Muller, "Covenant and Conscience in English Reformed Theology: Three Variations on a 17th Century Theme," *WTJ* 42.2 (1980): 308–34; Brady, "A Study of Ideas of the Conscience in Puritan Writings 1590–1640"; Christopher Haigh, "Conscience and Conformity: Some Moral Dilemmas in Seventeenth-Century England," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 11.1 (2013): 65–83; Meek, "The Development of the Concept of the Conscience."

13. "Perkins' writings differ in an important way from those of his contemporaries, for they evidence an intense interest in conscience not found in the works of his Puritan peers. In fact, it may be argued that Perkins' emphasis on conscience was the foundation of a new theology, one that may be labeled a 'theology of conscience'" (L. John Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience: The History of a Puritan Idea* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1972], p. 16); "Perkins' contribution to the development of an understanding of liberty of conscience was monumental though his contribution has not been fully appreciated" (Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience*, p. 23).

14. Kevin T. Kelly, *Conscience: Dictator or Guide? A Study in Seventeenth-Century English Protestant Moral Theology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), p. 83.

in teaching “that conscience was the means or device that allowed Christians to determine with a high degree of accuracy the condition of the soul.”¹⁵ The conscience could play such a significant role because of its truthfulness since, as Matthew Payne observes, Perkins believed that the “conscience is the most functional of the faculties after the trauma of original sin.”¹⁶ Thus, Perkins

15. Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience*, p. 16.

16. Matthew N. Payne, “William Perkins’s Doctrines of Faith and Assurance through the Lens of Early Modern Faculty Psychology,” *WTJ* 83.2 (2021): 326.

17. Muller, “Covenant and Conscience in English Reformed Theology,” pp. 308–09.

18. On this emphasis, see especially Lucas Sabatier Marques Leite, “Conscience Care: An Analysis of William Perkins’ View of the Conscience and His Practice of Soul Care,” *Revista Batista Pioneira* 12.2 (2023): 73–89.

19. J. I. Packer, *The Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), p. 107.

20. For a few notable works that examine confessional subscription in contexts that preceded the American Presbyterian church, see three essays in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*: Peter A. Lillback, “Confessional Subscription Among the Sixteenth Century Reformers,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. David W. Hall, 3rd ed. (Powder Springs, GA: The Covenant Foundation, 2018), pp. 51–95; W. Robert Godfrey, “Subscription in the Dutch Reformed Tradition,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, pp. 96–107; J. Ligon Duncan III, “Owning the Confession: Subscription in the Scottish Presbyterian Tradition,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, pp. 108–26; more recently, see also Scheuers, *Consciences and the Reformation*.

21. Samuel Miller, *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions: Addressed Particularly to Candidates for the Ministry* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1839); James H. Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, ed. John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873), 4.298–375; B. M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875), pp. 181–209; Charles Hodge, “Adoption of the Confession of Faith,” *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 30.4 (1858): 669–92; Benjamin B. Warfield, “Presbyterian Churches and the Westminster Confession,” *Presbyterian Review* 10.40 (1889): 648–65; Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (1878; repr., New York: Westminster Publishing House, 2001), pp. 317–342; J. V. Fesko, “The Legacy of Old School Confession Subscription in the OPC,” *JETS* 46.4 (2003): 673–98; William S. Barker, “The Samuel Hemphill Heresy Case (1735) and the Historic Method of Subscribing to the Westminster Standards,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, pp. 186–211; James E. Urish, “A Peaceable Plea About Subscription: Toward Avoiding Future Divisions,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, pp. 260–98; David B. Calhoun, “Honest Subscription: Old Princeton and Subscription to the Westminster Standards,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, pp. 299–310; John Murray, “Creed Subscription in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A.,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, pp. 311–31; David W. Hall, “Re-Examining the Re-Examiners of the Adopting Act,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, pp. 332–69.

22. *Minutes of the 30th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2002), pp. 212–13, 218–37; *Minutes*

taught that the conscience played a significant role in a believer’s assurance of salvation by shifting attention “away from human actions to the inward man for signs of salvation,” especially by the conscience’s evaluation of actions and affections as “grounds for personal assurance of salvation—or, more specifically, evidences of personal communion with God’s saving will under the terms of the covenant of grace.”¹⁷ Finally, we cannot overstate the degree to which Perkins emphasized conscience care as the essence of pastoral soul care.¹⁸ It was largely due to the influence of Perkins that subsequent Puritans emphasized the importance for a man that “his conscience should be enlightened, instructed, purged, and kept clean.”¹⁹

The relationship between liberty of conscience and confessional subscription became a point of emphasis at the establishment of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) in the 18th century.²⁰ In the establishment of the PCUSA, the articulation of the doctrine of liberty of conscience in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was foundational. Then, significant moments that shaped the PCUSA’s understanding of the nature of confessional subscription included the 1729 Adopting Act, the second ordination vow regarding subscription adopted by the 1788 Synod of New York and Philadelphia, the debates between Old School and New School Presbyterians, and specific writings from notable theologians including Samuel Miller, Charles Hodge, J. H. Thornwell, B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, and John Murray.²¹ Although there are many important details of the debate from this period and within the rich secondary literature, the focus of this paper depends more on the nuances of the debate within the PCA specifically, to which we will turn our attention now.

OFFICIAL ACTIONS AT PCA GENERAL ASSEMBLIES

From her founding in 1973, the PCA has never stated clearly in the BCO whether a teaching elder may teach his presbytery-approved doctrinal differences. The 31st General Assembly in 2003 finalized the adoption of the “good faith” subscription amendments to the BCO, which clarified that ministers do not need to affirm “every statement and/or proposition of doctrine in our *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*,” but that candidates must state any differences for the Presbytery to judge whether they “may not be able in good faith sincerely to receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures” (BCO 21–4.f).²² Yet,

this constitutional amendment only clarified the manner in which doctrinal exceptions would be judged as permissible or impermissible among those seeking admission as teaching elders in presbyteries. Neither this constitutional amendment, nor any other part of the BCO, has given a clear rule about whether, or to what extent, teaching elders are permitted to teach their approved doctrinal exceptions within the wider church.

Some of the clearest advice on the matter came from the 14th General Assembly in 1986, which attempted to balance the liberty of conscience of the man and the preservation of the “peace and purity of the church”:

When a man is ordained with the allowance of exceptions to his full acceptance of the PCA standards, he thereby obtains (1) approval of his suitability to function within the ordained office, and (2) liberty to believe and live in some way not fully in accord with some portion of those standards. This allowance of exceptions, however, does not warrant his teaching or preaching of that matter so as to disturb the peace and purity of the church. The court of jurisdiction must determine in each situation whether such unwarranted actions have occurred.²³

Here, we see the articulation of a basic principle that the PCA used in subsequent attempts to adjudicate between the two seemingly incommensurable values: the granting of exceptions extends liberty of conscience to such a degree that the teaching elder may “believe and live in some way not fully in accord with some portion of those standards”; but it does not extend so far to permit the teaching elder to teach those exceptions in a manner “so as to disturb the peace and purity of the church.” Notice, though, that this statement neither forbids nor permits the teaching and preaching of approved doctrinal exceptions. Further, the 14th General Assembly does not here identify or prescribe a process for proactively approving certain doctrinal exceptions to be taught. Instead, the only course of action suggested is for concerned parties to pursue discipline in cases where “unwarranted actions have occurred.” On what basis, though, should presbyteries decide whether “unwarranted actions have occurred”? Where does the presbytery’s right to protect the peace and purity of the Church end and the liberty of the teaching elder’s conscience begin? In this early statement, the PCA stopped short of offering any clear guidelines to connect, compare, and prioritize those values in specific cases, leaving them as incommensurable as apples and oranges.

Subsequent General Assemblies sought to apply this

statement from the 14th General Assembly to several other specific cases and questions that arose, but without any significant advances to resolve the seeming incommensurability of the two values at stake. Instead, General Assemblies primarily considered whether the peace and purity of the church has been, or may be, disturbed. So, in 1990, the Committee on Constitutional Business (CCB) answered a reference by stating that, “presbyteries do have jurisdiction over [teaching elders] and have the authority to restrict a minister from preaching views which the presbytery is convinced may be harmful to the spiritual welfare of the churches under its care (BCO 13–9 and 34–5).”²⁴ There was a dissent to this position, but the grounds for the dissent were narrowly technical: two members of CCB observed that the committee had declined to interpret the “broad general provision” in the BCO concerning Sessions as authorizing Sessions to restrict preaching in their pulpits, but that CCB had drawn a Presbytery’s right to restrict the teaching of teaching elders based on similarly general provisions. Without necessarily arguing in either direction, the dissent simply pleaded for interpretive consistency: “Therefore, we dissent on the basis that the delegated powers of a Presbytery should not be interpreted more broadly than those delegated to a Session.”²⁵ Then, in 1992, the Standing Judicial Commission (SJC) took up a case where a presbytery had forbidden a teaching elder from teaching and preaching about the continuation of extraordinary gifts.²⁶ In that case, the SJC observed that, “in past judicial cases approved by General Assembly, the court of original jurisdiction has been recognized to have power to determine whether a particular teaching or preaching is heretical, erroneous, or such as disturbs the peace or purity of the church. It is clear that presbytery has power to limit teaching and preaching accordingly when it makes such a determination.”²⁷ Therefore, the SJC unanimously determined (and the 20th General Assembly voted to approve) that “Presbyteries may

of the 31st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2003), pp. 50–51, 54–56.

23. *Minutes of the 14th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1986), pp. 125–26.*

24. *Minutes of the 18th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1990), p. 205.*

25. *M18GA*, pp. 207–08.

26. “Robert D. Hopper vs. James River Presbytery (Judicial Case No. 91–4),” in *Minutes of the 20th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1992), pp. 160–96.*

27. *M20GA*, p. 162.

exercise such power over the preaching and teaching of its members short of a determination that the forbidden teaching is heresy, without necessarily binding the consciences of the men under its care.”²⁸ Further, they outlined the burden of proof that would be required for a teaching elder to file a successful complaint against such a restriction: the teaching elder “would have to prove that for a presbytery to forbid a teaching elder to teach and preach the continuation of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit in the present day is explicitly contrary to the Word of God.”²⁹ This decision set the bar high in favor of protecting the peace and purity of the Church by requiring a teaching elder to prove positively that the church had erred in their doctrinal standards. Short of persuading the denomination to amend the Westminster Standards, it is unclear how a teaching elder would sufficiently prove this case.

Beginning in the late 1990s, however, some judicial decisions began to recognize a wider degree of latitude for teaching elders to teach their doctrinal exceptions. So, in 1998, the SJC continued to uphold a Presbytery’s right to prohibit a teaching elder from preaching and teaching his “anthropomorphic” views on creation in the interests of showing “deference” (BCO 39–3) to the lower court’s judgment of “the candidate, the issues, and the internal well being of [the presbytery].”³⁰ Nevertheless, a dissent argued against this opinion on substantive grounds: because there was “no evidence in the [record of the case] that [the teaching elder’s] views, if taught or preached, would be ‘destructive to the external peace and order’ of the Church,” and since “the decisions of the 26th General Assembly made it clear that views like those of [the teaching elder] are not inherently out of accord with our standards,” then several factors (including “the Reformation principle of liberty of conscience”) suggested that “it would be

inappropriate to prohibit [the teaching elder] from taking a full and proper part in this process, including his right to teach and preach his views.”³¹ We should make two observations about these opinions. First, the majority decision was fully in line with previous judicial desires to protect the peace and purity of the Church. Further, the dissenting minority argued their case on the same criteria, so that their only difference was in coming to a different interpretation of the evidence: namely, that there was “no evidence” that the position would be “destructive to the external peace and order” of the Church.” This is a much lower bar than requiring the teaching elder to prove positively that prohibiting such teaching would be “explicitly contrary to the Word of God.” Second, this dissent argues more forcefully in favor of protecting the minister’s liberty of conscience than the technical dissent within CCB from 1990 had done. Rather than requesting consistency in interpreting the rules related to courts at various levels of oversight, this dissent advocates directly for the right of teaching elders to teach their approved doctrinal exceptions.

Even so, it is difficult to trace any clear trajectory for the attitudes of the PCA on this question because the PCA gave conflicting answers to substantively similar questions. The confusion on this subject is perhaps nowhere so clear as the way in which the PCA has handled doctrinal exceptions related to paedocommunion. The 16th General Assembly rejected a proposal to recognize the practice of paedocommunion as “in agreement with the Scripture.”³² Nevertheless, Bryan Chapell notes that, “in a curious confirmation of the right to teach allowable exceptions, the [16th General] Assembly even passed a motion approving distribution of source material explaining the paedocommunion view that it had just refused to introduce into its Standards.”³³ Similarly, different General Assemblies registered differing degrees of concern when presbyteries approved teaching elders’ doctrinal exceptions related to paedocommunion, or permitted men to teach the view. So, the 39th General Assembly in 2011 issued an exception of substance to a presbytery who had approved a doctrinal exception related to paedocommunion, and who had given the teaching elder “full liberty to preach and teach” that view.³⁴ The next year in 2012, the 40th General Assembly approved a response from that presbytery, which noted that they had “in recent years repeatedly granted that liberty [to preach and teach the doctrinal exception] to ordinands taking the paedocommunion exception and never once has any review committee or general assembly taken an exception to Presbytery’s

28. M20GA, p. 164.

29. M20GA, p. 164.

30. “Case 98–5: Complaint of Harry Long, et. al., vs. James River Presbytery,” in *Minutes of the 27th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1999)*, pp. 74–75.

31. “Dissenting Opinion in Case 98–5: Long, et. al., vs. James River Presbytery,” in M27GA, pp. 75–77.

32. *Minutes of the 16th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1988)*, pp. 119, 527.

33. Bryan Chapell, “Perspective on the Presbyterian Church in America’s Subscription Standards,” *Presbyterion* 27.2 (2001): 82, citing M16GA, p. 120.

34. *Minutes of the 39th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2011)*, pp. 474–75.

minutes on that account.”³⁵ The presbytery even noted that the 26th General Assembly in 1998 had approved as satisfactory that presbytery’s statement that they had granted a teaching elder “full liberty to preach this exception” regarding paedocommunion.³⁶ On the other hand, other General Assemblies rejected the rights of presbyteries to approve such an exception, or, required those presbyteries to restrict ministers from preaching and teaching that position. The very next year in 2013, the 41st General Assembly cited a presbytery for granting such a doctrinal exception on paedocommunion, and the 43rd General Assembly in 2015 only accepted the response of the presbytery when it clarified, in part, that the candidate in question “specifically expressed commitment to not in any way teach, advocate, or practice paedocommunion, as he in good conscience yielded to this presbytery’s practice in the administration of the sacrament, sufficiently and pastorally fences the table.”³⁷ The fact that different Assemblies took contradictory stances on this topic illustrates that the PCA had not yet determined a clear way to balance the values of liberty of conscience with the peace and purity of the church.

Similarly, we may again consider the recent debates at the 46th, 47th, and 48th General Assemblies mentioned in the introduction of this article over a restriction against teaching a doctrinal exception regarding images of Christ. The year before that debate began, the 45th General Assembly in 2017 narrowly adopted a minority report from CRPR to cite a presbytery with an exception of substance because “Presbytery distributed to worshippers the Worship Guide, the cover of which included an apparent representation of the second person of the Trinity, thereby introducing that representation into worship.”³⁸ So, the 45th General Assembly found an exception of substance against the practice of using images of Christ, but the 46th and 47th General Assemblies insisted that it would be wrong to prohibit a teaching elder from preaching or teaching about using images of Christ. Finally, the 48th General Assembly insisted that presbyteries possessed the authority to prohibit the teaching of such an exception. These four consecutive General Assemblies came to widely differing opinions about how to handle differences from the Standards on the Second Commandment. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the PCA has lacked any clear coordination between the two seemingly incommensurable values of liberty of conscience and the peace and purity of the Church, so that specific decisions have been decided only by virtue of who shows up at a given Assembly.

INDIVIDUAL VOICES WITHIN THE PCA

Beyond official decisions within the courts of the church, several individual voices within the PCA have advocated for different answers on the question of whether a teaching elder may teach his doctrinal exceptions. Some, such as George Knight and Morton Smith, have advocated for a stricter standard of subscription which would largely preclude the need to teach against the denomination’s doctrinal standards.³⁹ Smith directly took up the specific question of teaching doctrinal exceptions and insisted that “the allowance of the exception is not an agreement that it is not contrary to the system of doctrine or the allowance for the individual to teach against the doctrines of the church.”⁴⁰ Smith did, however, suggest that some “compromise” may be reached if the full subscriptionist view he suggested could not persuade the whole church:

For example, it might be possible to permit the teaching of other views if the vote of the Presbytery to allow it is at least a 3/4ths vote, or to forbid the teaching of an exception if a majority of Presbytery voted to prohibit it. Along with this one might take the position of Charles Hodge, who allowed some leeway for the ordinary minister, but did not allow it for those teaching in Seminaries.⁴¹

35. *Minutes of the 40th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2012)*, p. 460.

36. *Minutes of the 26th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1998)*, p. 460.

37. *Minutes of the 41st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2013)*, p. 465; *Minutes of the 43rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2015)*, pp. 420–23.

38. *Minutes of the 45th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2017)*, p. 33. The substitute amendment was adopted 353–321–49, and the amended main motion was adopted 478–300–48.

39. George W. Knight, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,” *Presbyterian* 10.1–2 (1984): 20–55; George W. Knight, “A Response to Dr. William Barker’s Article ‘Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,’” *Presbyterian* 10.1–2 (1984): 56–63; Morton H. Smith, *The Case for Full Subscription to the Westminster Standards in the Presbyterian Church in America* (Greenville, SC: GPTS Press, 1992).

40. Smith, *The Case for Full Subscription*, p. 49.

41. Smith, *The Case for Full Subscription*, p. 54; citing Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity*, p. 327.

Along similar lines, the PCA also received a study paper on “Confessional Subscription” in 1982 that argued for requiring subscription to our doctrinal standards that would recognize those standards as articulating “the very doctrines of the Word.” Since this view interprets the Westminster Standards as a faithful interpretation of Scripture, teaching against the Standards means opposing God’s Word. This view would push against permitting teaching elders to teach their approved exceptions. The 10th General Assembly “received” this study “as information and . . . commended to the presbyteries, Sessions and Board of Deacons for study.”⁴² Additionally, it is perhaps also worth noting in this connection the “Report of the Creation Study Committee” from 2000, in which the authors recognize that some in the PCA believe that any view other than the Calendar Day view would constitute “an exception to the teaching of the Standards,” and then add this note: “A court that grants an exception has the prerogative of not permitting the exception to be taught at all. If the individual is permitted to teach his view, he must also agree to present the position of the Standards as the position of the Church.”⁴³

Those advocating for stricter confessional subscription defended their views against charges of violating conscience on two major grounds. First, they argued for putting a higher importance on the church’s protection of the purity of Scriptural doctrine. In this vein, Knight

42. “Confessional Subscription: A Study Paper from the PCA’s Tenth General Assembly (1982),” in *Minutes of the Tenth General Assembly (1982) of the PCA*, pp. 220–24, <https://www.pcahistory.org/documents/subscription/1982paper.html>.

43. *M28GA*, p. 183. Contained within the summary of one particular view of how courts should handle various views of creation, it is unclear whether this statement about the court’s prerogative to limit the teaching of such an exception was intended to summarize the approach of only those who would also hold that other views of creation (other than the Calendar Day view) would constitute an exception, or whether this was intended as a general statement about how to handle any approved exception within the PCA.

44. Knight, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,” p. 22.

45. *M10GA*, p. 220.

46. Fesko, “The Legacy of Old School Confession Subscription in the OPC,” p. 697.

47. William S. Barker, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,” *Presbyterian* 10.1–2 (1984): 1–19; William S. Barker, “A Response to Professor George Knight’s Article ‘Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,’” *Presbyterian* 10.1–2 (1984): 64–71; William S. Barker, “System Subscription,” *WTJ* 63.1 (2001): 1–14; Chapell, “Perspective on the Presbyterian Church in America’s Subscription Standards.”

48. Chapell, “Perspective on the Presbyterian Church in America’s Subscription Standards,” p. 92.

49. Chapell, “Perspective on the Presbyterian Church in America’s Subscription Standards,” p. 93.

appealed to the Adopting Act of 1729, arguing that “[t]he Synod in its opening words disavows the charge that subscribing to such confessional standards is an imposition upon other men’s consciences but rather affirms that it is necessary ‘to take care that the faith once delivered to the Saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our Posterity.’”⁴⁴ This concern matches the determination from the 14th General Assembly (cited by subsequent General Assemblies) that ministers granted doctrinal exceptions must not teach their approved exceptions in any way that would “disturb the peace and purity of the church.”

Second, they suggested that doctrinal standards only bind consciences to the doctrines found in the Word of God. So, the 1982 PCA Study Paper on Confessional Subscription states that, because “our Church has declared [the Confession of Faith and Catechisms] to be a true and faithful interpretation of the teaching of the Word of God, . . . they do bind the consciences of men, not for any authority resident in them, but because they are Scriptural and because those who subscribe to them do so voluntarily.”⁴⁵ Others have adopted a similar position but more clearly defined the relationship between the Scripture, the confessions, and the conscience. From the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, for example, J. V. Fesko summarizes the views from Old School Presbyterians such as Charles Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield, James H. Thornwell, J. Gresham Machen, and John Murray as teaching that “[o]fficers must subscribe to the Standards *quia* [‘because’] they contain the doctrines of Scripture as understood by the Church, but they [i.e., those Standards] can bind the conscience only *quatenus* [‘insofar as’] the teachings of the Standards accord with Scripture. This is the formula of historic Reformed theology as well as Old School Presbyterianism.”⁴⁶ These voices express concern for liberty of conscience, but they are primarily concerned with protecting the peace and purity of the church.

Others, however, have argued in favor of allowing teaching elders to teach their exceptions.⁴⁷ Chapell first observes that “Scripture rather than the Confession must rule our decisions,” and that “we cannot require men in good conscience to confess their faith in an article of our Standards that may either contradict or add to the Word of God (WCF XX.2).”⁴⁸ From this, Chapell then argues that “[a]utomatically prohibiting men from teaching any exception runs the risk of granting the Confession the status of Scripture,” so that “teaching restrictions should be prudentially imposed only when the ‘peace and purity of the church’ are clearly threatened.”⁴⁹ Whereas those with stricter views of

confessional subscription believe that most (if not all) differences would disturb the peace and purity of the church if taught, Chapell and others believe that very few doctrinal exceptions would rise to that level of concern. Beyond even Chapell's position, William Barker has argued that, if a presbytery approves an exception, then it must permit the teaching elder man to teach that exception:

If that is the case [that a candidate's differences are such "that he cannot be deemed as sincerely taking his ordination vow (e.g., the second ordination vow)"], then the Presbytery should not approve him for ordination. On the other hand, if the Presbytery determines that [a teaching elder's] exceptions do not represent a violation of his ordination vow, he should be ordained and should also be able to teach such exceptions, since he is conscience-bound to teach the whole counsel of God, as revealed in Scripture, whose authority he also has affirmed elsewhere in his ordination vows. But he should teach such exceptions with utmost sensitivity to the peace and purity of the church.⁵⁰

Significantly, note that both Chapell and Barker argue for some ability for teaching elders to teach their doctrinal convictions from the premise that the consciences of men must be bound to Scripture alone. Here, these men do express concern for the peace and purity of the church; however, they favor liberty of conscience for the minister.

SUMMARY OF THE PCA DEBATE ABOUT WHETHER TEACHING ELDERS MAY TEACH DOCTRINAL EXCEPTIONS

In summarizing this debate, we may return to the question of the seemingly incommensurable values. Some individuals (and some General Assemblies) have prioritized the First Preliminary Principle's affirmation of liberty of conscience over the Church's right to protect her peace and purity. Others, however, have prioritized the Second Preliminary Principle over the First. Both groups would affirm the importance of those values to some degree; however, both groups have struggled to find any principle that allows the apples of the First Preliminary Principle to be compared commensurably to the oranges of the Second. It is with this seemingly intractable dilemma in view that we turn to William Perkins on the conscience.

WILLIAM PERKINS ON THE CONSCIENCE

Within the rising interest in William Perkins generally, numerous studies have given attention to Perkins' treatment of the conscience specifically.⁵¹ For Perkins, the role of the conscience is not minor. Coleman Markham, for example, makes a compelling case that "Perkins' understanding of conscience is the central factor in his writings, the point at which soteriology and ethics, faith and works, are held together."⁵² Indeed, Perkins considers the soteriological question of "How a man may know whether he is a child of God or not" as the "greatest" issue related to the conscience, thus setting conscience at the heart of one's most basic assurance of his own salvation.⁵³ Additionally, Perkins also treated detailed questions of Christian ethics as "cases of conscience," seeking to apply the whole counsel of God to various questions of conduct that arise in human experience.⁵⁴ In this section, we will work through Perkins's description of the nature and function of the conscience from his treatise, *A Discourse on Conscience*.⁵⁵

50. Barker, "System Subscription," p. 7.

51. Coleman Cain Markham, "William Perkins' Understanding of the Function of Conscience" (PhD Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1967); Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience*, pp. 16–28; Muller, "Covenant and Conscience in English Reformed Theology"; Meek, "The Development of the Concept of the Conscience"; Joel R. Beeke, "The Greatest Case of Conscience," in *William Perkins: Architect of Puritanism*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Greg Salazar (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), pp. 57–94; Payne, "William Perkins's Doctrines of Faith and Assurance"; Leite, "Conscience Care"; Jacob D. Gerber, "William Perkins on Conscience and Casuistry: Puritan Foundations for Reformed, Scriptural Ethics," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 19 (2023): 181–94. See also Packer, *The Quest for Godliness*, pp. 107–22; Beeke and Jones, "The Puritans on Conscience."

52. Markham, "William Perkins' Understanding of the Function of Conscience," p. 18.

53. William Perkins, "A Case of Conscience. The Greatest That Ever Was: How a Man May Know Whether He Is the Child of God or Not. Resolved by the Word of God," in *The Works of William Perkins*, volume 8, ed. J. Stephen Yuille, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas (1595; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), pp. 595–638.

54. William Perkins, "The Whole Treatise of The Cases of Conscience," in *The Works of William Perkins*, volume 8, ed. J. Stephen Yuille, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas (1606; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), pp. 95–440; Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, "Puritan Casuistry," in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), pp. 927–45; Gerber, "William Perkins on Conscience and Casuistry," pp. 184–94.

55. See also Gerber, "William Perkins on Conscience and Casuistry," pp. 183–84.

THE FUNCTION OF CONSCIENCE

Perkins begins his treatise by classifying the conscience within the faculty of the understanding (rather than the will), and specifically as an aspect of practical understanding, rather than theoretical understanding, since “its property is to judge of the goodness or badness of things or actions done.”⁵⁶ Thus, human consciences do not provide “a bare knowledge or judgment of the understanding,” but they take “the principles and conclusions of the mind and apply them, and by applying either to accuse or excuse.”⁵⁷ The scope of this application is limited to “a man’s own actions,” for “conscience meddles not with generals; it deals only in particular actions.”⁵⁸

Perkins suggests a surprisingly high estimation of the value of the conscience: “conscience is of a divine nature, and is a thing placed by God in the midst between Him and man, as an arbitrator to give sentence, and to pronounce either with man or against man unto God.”⁵⁹ Perkins draws this conclusion, in part, from the etymology of the term: “con” (with) and “scire” (to know), so that “*conscientia* (conscience), is that thing that combines two together, and makes them partners in the knowledge of one and the same secret.”⁶⁰ Specifically, through the conscience, God shares his own knowledge of his judgment of a man: “God knows perfectly all the doings of man, though they are ever so hidden and concealed, and man by a gift given him of God, knows together with God the same things of himself, and this gift is named conscience.”⁶¹ This knowledge is extensive in many ways. First, the knowledge of conscience considers not only external actions, but even a man’s secret thoughts and affections.⁶² Second, the knowledge of conscience is meticulous, so that “it observes and takes notice of all things that we do” and “does inwardly and secretly within the heart tell us of

them all.”⁶³ Third, conscience stores its records forever, unto the day of judgment:

Touching the third point: how long conscience bears witness. It does continually, not for a minute, or a day, or a month, or a year, but forever. When a man dies, conscience dies not. When the body is rotting in the grave, conscience lives and is safe and sound. And when we shall rise again, conscience shall come with us to the bar of God’s judgment, either to accuse or excuse us before God. “Their conscience bearing witness at the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ” (Rom. 2:15–16).⁶⁴

In this way, conscience offers a preliminary judgment that stands in direct continuity with God’s own judgment on the last day:

Herein conscience is like to a judge who holds an assize, and takes notice of indictments, and causes the most notorious malefactor that is to hold up his hand at the bar of his judgment. Nay, it is (as it were) a little god sitting in the middle of men’s hearts, arraigning them in this life as they shall be arraigned for their offences at the tribunal seat of the ever-living God in the day of judgment. Wherefore, the temporary judgment that is given by the conscience is nothing else but a beginning (or a forerunner) of the last judgment.⁶⁵

This last point clarifies why Perkins assigned such significance to the conscience. For Perkins, the judgment of a man’s conscience offers a preview of God’s own judgment.

Next, Perkins argues that conscience executes its judgment with “two assistants: mind and memory. The mind is the storehouse and keeper of all manner of rules and principles. . . . Memory serves to bring to mind the particular actions which a man has done or not done, so that conscience may determine of them.”⁶⁶ Further, “Conscience gives judgment in or by a kind of reasoning or disputing, called a practical syllogism . . . ‘Every murderer is cursed,’ says the mind. ‘You are a murderer,’ says conscience assisted by memory. *Ergo*, ‘You are accursed,’ says conscience, and so gives her sentence.”⁶⁷ This judgment of conscience will involve both *accusation* (“Every murderer is a sinner. ‘Your action is murder.’ *Ergo*, ‘Your action is a sin.’”) as well as *condemnation* (“Every murderer deserves a double death. ‘You are a murderer.’ *Ergo*, ‘You have deserved a double death.’”). Then, the accusation having been proven according to the principles laid up in the mind and the actions recorded in the memory,

56. William Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” in *The Works of William Perkins*, volume 8, ed. J. Stephen Yuille, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas (1596; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), p. 7; for a more detailed study of the conscience as a facet of Perkins’s faculty psychology, see Payne, “William Perkins’s Doctrines of Faith and Assurance.”

57. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” pp. 7–8.

58. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” pp. 8–9.

59. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 9.

60. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 9.

61. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 9.

62. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” pp. 10–11.

63. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 11.

64. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 11.

65. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 12.

66. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 50.

67. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 50.

conscience executes its judgment by “stir[ring] up sundry passions and motions in the heart,” including shame, sorrow, fear, desperation, and perturbation.⁶⁸

Beyond accusing and condemning, the conscience may also excuse and absolve: “To excuse is an action of the conscience giving judgment that the thing is well done. To absolve is an action of the conscience giving judgment that a man is free or clear from fault and so from punishment.”⁶⁹ Although Adam’s conscience was originally good in the estate of innocence, original sin made his conscience become evil, along with the consciences of all who were then descended from him.⁷⁰ Our evil consciences may now only become good by regeneration, where the conscience which has been “corrupt by nature, is renewed and purged by faith in the blood of Christ.”⁷¹ Finally, conscience plays a role in protecting its regenerated goodness by evaluating possible actions before we take them: “Conscience gives judgment of things to come by foretelling and, as it were, saying inwardly in the heart that the thing may be well done or ill done. . . . God also has appointed our conscience to be our companion and guide, to show us what course we may take, and what we may not.”⁷² Therefore, the two main duties we have are (1) to get a good conscience (by regeneration) and (2) to keep a good conscience by avoiding impediments to conscience, and by the use of the “preservatives” of justification and sanctification.⁷³

With this general sketch of Perkins’s understanding of the conscience, we will now turn to two major issues related to the conscience that sit at the heart of the question of whether a pastor may teach his doctrinal differences.

THE BINDING OF THE CONSCIENCE

The first issue of direct relevance deals with the question of binding the conscience. Perkins labels any grounds upon which the conscience will judge a man as a “binder of the conscience,” or “that thing whatsoever which has power and authority over conscience to order it. To bind is to urge, cause, and constrain it in every action, either to accuse for sin or excuse for well doing, or to say this may be done or it may not be done.”⁷⁴ The Word of God is the only proper binder of conscience, and all other sources improperly bind the conscience.⁷⁵ Whether the Word of God declares law or gospel, the preaching of the Word of God lawfully binds the conscience to believe and to obey.⁷⁶ On the other hand, an “improper binder is that which has no power or virtue in itself to bind conscience, but does it only by virtue of

God’s Word or of some part of it,” and may arise from “human laws, an oath, [or] a promise.”⁷⁷ It is important to notice here that Perkins does not reject the idea that these improper binders of conscience have authority; by “improper,” he only means that their authority does not reside in themselves, but secondarily, from God’s law.⁷⁸

So, Perkins insists that only Christ may bind and loose, since he alone possesses “the keys of heaven and hell,” and “[a]s for the power of the church, it is nothing but a ministry of service whereby men publish and pronounce what Christ binds or looses.”⁷⁹ Yet, this does not mean that the conscience of each man is directly subject to God alone, without reference to any other leader set in authority. Rather, while God alone does possess sovereign and absolute authority to command obedience, Perkins also argues that “necessary obedience is to be performed both to civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction.”⁸⁰ Civil and ecclesiastical authorities bind consciences, then, as a secondary consequence of the primary authority of God: “Wholesome laws of men, made of things indifferent, bind conscience by virtue of the general commandment of God, which ordains the magistrate’s authority, so as whosoever shall wittingly and willingly, with a disloyal mind, either break or omit such laws, is guilty of sin before God.”⁸¹ Therefore, when leaders in the church administer God’s laws, those leaders bind consciences, but they do so according to God’s authority rather than their own:

If the case falls out otherwise, as commonly it does, that human laws are not enacted of things indifferent, but of things that are good in themselves, that is, commanded by God, then they are not human properly but divine laws. Men’s laws, entreating of things that are morally good and the parts of God’s worship, are the same with God’s laws and, therefore, bind conscience, not because they were enacted by men, but because they were first made by God. Men [are] no more but instruments and ministers

68. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” pp. 51–53.

69. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 53.

70. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 56.

71. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 56.

72. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 53.

73. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” pp. 86–91.

74. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 13.

75. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 13.

76. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 24.

77. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 26.

78. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” pp. 26–35.

79. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 27.

80. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 35.

81. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 39.

in His name to revive, renew, and put in execution such precepts and laws as prescribe the worship of God, standing in the practice of true religion and virtue.⁸²

It is therefore good and right for ministers to bind consciences by establishing rules that promote what God himself has commanded.

It is on this basis that Perkins makes a crucial point regarding creeds and confessions. For Perkins, such doctrinal statements are binding, but not according to the authority of men. The men who adopt credal and confessional statements do so as a ministerial administration of God's own authority in his Word: "As for the creeds and confessions of particular churches, they are in substance God's Word, and they bind not in conscience by any power the church has, but because they are the Word of God."⁸³ Notice that Perkins teaches that creeds and confessions bind "because" (i.e., *quia*) they express "in substance God's Word"—that is, because they are biblical. This is a very similar idea to what the *BCO* expresses in the statement that, "The *Confession of Faith* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms* of the Westminster Assembly, together with the formularies of government, discipline, and worship are accepted by the Presbyterian Church in America as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice" (*BCO* 29–1). Our doctrinal statements do not bind consciences by their own authority, but only because they are biblical.

SINNING AGAINST CONSCIENCE

The second issue deals with Perkins' concept that "conscience is of great force and bears a great stroke."⁸⁴ This idea follows closely from the general importance that Perkins gives to the weight of conscience; however, he extends it with three significant principles. "First, whatsoever is done with a doubting conscience is a sin."⁸⁵ Here, Perkins cites Paul's words in Romans 14:23 to demonstrate that to disobey conscience is to disobey God: "He that doubteth is condemned, if he eat: because he eateth not of faith."⁸⁶ Perkins continues: "Second, whatsoever thing is done with erroneous conscience

is a sin."⁸⁷ That is, the fact that someone's conscience does not feel condemned by something that God has identified as sin (Perkins gives the example of the permissive attitude of the Gentiles toward the sin of fornication) does not make that action any less sinful. On the other hand, Perkins also argues that something objectively permissible is also sin, if it is done against the conscience: "Third, what is done against conscience, though it errs and is deceived, is sin in the doer."⁸⁸ To illustrate the point, Perkins gives the following example:

Example. An Anabaptist, holding it utterly unlawful to swear, is brought before a magistrate, and urged either through fear or some like cause, takes an oath, and that against his own conscience. Now the question is whether he has sinned or not? Answer. He has indeed sinned, not so much because he has taken an oath, for that is the ordinance of God; but because he has taken an oath in a bad manner, that is, against his conscience, and therefore not in faith.⁸⁹

So, if someone's conscience is overly loose, he sins by following his (erroneous) conscience into violating the objective Word of God. On the other hand, if someone's conscience is overly strict, he sins when he disregards his (erring and deceived) conscience, even though his actions in themselves do not violate the Word of God. Further, if someone does anything at all with a doubting conscience apart from faith, he sins against his conscience. Because of the close relationship between God's knowledge, as revealed in His Word, and our knowledge (as set down in the principles and conclusions we draw from God's Word and store in our minds), we are bound both to God's Word and to our consciences.

CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS AS THE MIND OF THE CHURCH

With these two issues in mind, we may draw out an observation and an implication about Perkins's approach to creeds and confessions. As an observation, it may help us to understand Perkins's strong assertions that creeds and confessions are "in substance God's Word" by recognizing that he is treating those creeds and confessions, functionally speaking, as the "mind" of the Church. We may recall that Perkins considers the mind to be "the storehouse and keeper of all manner of rules and principles," so that consciences take "the principles and conclusions of the mind and apply them, and by applying either to accuse or excuse." To be sure, human minds err in varying degrees, just as creeds and confessions can err (WCF

82. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 39.

83. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 42.

84. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 53.

85. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 54.

86. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 54.

87. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 54.

88. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 54.

89. Perkins, "A Discourse of Conscience," p. 54.

31.3).⁹⁰ Further, error in the mind can significantly mislead the conscience: “For when the mind errs or misconceives, it does mislead the conscience and deceive[s] the whole man.”⁹¹ Accordingly, if the mind constructs rules that permit or lead someone into sin, the mind will mislead the conscience and deceive a man into sinning. Nevertheless, the conscience cannot work apart from a clear grasp of rules and principles: “The understanding must first of all conceive, or at the least have means of conceiving, before conscience can constrain, because it binds by virtue of known conclusions in the mind.”⁹² While each person’s mind establishes his own set of rules and principles (with varying degrees of accuracy), so also the creeds and confessions of different churches establish the mind of those churches on any number of matters, with varying degrees of accuracy. Insofar as those creeds and confessions are biblical, they bind the conscience of the Church to God’s Word. In areas where creeds and confessions are not strictly biblical, Perkins suggests making an important distinction. On the one hand, if creeds or confessions authorize or command sin, then they bind the conscience of the Church erroneously, and any individuals who would submit to such unlawful doctrines commit sin, regardless of what their churches teach. On this point, we might recall the decision of the PCA’s 20th General Assembly, which insisted that, for a teaching elder to file a successful complaint against a restriction on teaching his doctrinal exception, he would “have to prove that for a presbytery to forbid a teaching elder to teach and preach [his doctrinal exception] is explicitly contrary to the Word of God.” This may set a high bar for permitting a pastor to teach contrary to the Church’s doctrinal standards, but it does acknowledge that the explicit teaching of the Scriptures may overturn erroneous doctrines.

On the other hand, if a creed or confession errs by applying God’s Word in an overly strict way, the Church would sin against conscience by disregarding the mind of the Church on that issue.⁹³ As Perkins observed, an Anabaptist would not sin against the Word of God by taking an oath, but he would sin against his conscience. Importantly, this was not an individual Anabaptist conviction, but the conviction of the whole Anabaptist Church.⁹⁴ Thus, just as individuals are bound to the plain teaching of God’s Word as well as to their consciences, churches are bound by conscience to the Word of God and to the mind of the Church about the Word of God, as summarized in their creeds and confessions.⁹⁵

From that observation, we may then draw out a further implication: for the Church to permit her ministers to teach against the mind of the Church would violate the *conscience* of the Church. Indeed, my argument in

this paper is that understanding creeds and confessions as constituting the mind of the Church is the key to coordinating the seemingly incommensurable values of liberty of conscience on the one hand, and the peace and purity of the Church on the other. Specifically, by recognizing creeds and confessions as the mind of the Church, we see that this is not a question of pitting conscience against human authority (i.e., the authority of the Church). Rather, it is a question of how a man’s *individual* conscience should relate to the Church’s *public* conscience. Further, this implication clarifies that it would be sin against conscience for the Church to permit her officers to act against the mind of the Church, even in

90. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 84.

91. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 91.

92. Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” p. 21.

93. See Scheuers, who notes that the Reformers consciously recognized a place for lawful commands in the church that went beyond explicit commands in God’s Word: “Calvin and his colleagues justified their reform measures by distinguishing a special category of church constitution: one distinct from mere human traditions, which frequently bind peoples’ consciences to impious behavior (as they alleged to be the case in Catholicism); but also distinct from an explicit command of God’s word, since such observances are not necessary for salvation, nor ‘place the conscience under religious obligations.’ Nevertheless, Calvin insisted that such observances—including oaths, confessional subscription, and public confession—are not ancillary but rather essential to authentic piety. Such ‘legitimate church observances,’ he writes in his *Institutes* (1559), are required practically so that ‘in the sacred assembly of believers all things be done decently and with becoming dignity; and that the human community itself be kept in order with certain bonds of humanity and moderation.’ Such human constitutions, though not explicitly commanded in Scripture, are nevertheless ‘founded upon God’s authority’ (mediated through the offices of minister, elder, and magistrate), ‘drawn from Scripture’ (derived from the reformers’ interpretation of various text), and ‘therefore, *wholly divine*.’ Calvin even denied that ordinances necessary for the confession of faith are to be considered ‘human traditions’ at all, because they do not belong to the kind of ceremony that may be refused for the sake of private conscience (*adiaphora* proper). Instead, insofar as they edify one’s neighbor and serve the order and unity of Christ’s church in keeping with God’s will, such observances are best regarded as divine rather than human, and therefore are not open to the charge that they *harmfully* bind consciences” (Scheuers, *Consciences and the Reformation*, p. 233).

94. See, for example, the seventh point concerning oaths, in the Anabaptists’ Schleithem Confession (1527), in J. C. Wenger, trans., “The Schleithem Confession of Faith, 1527,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19.4 (1945): 247–53.

95. Again, see Scheuers, who demonstrates a very close similarity in the thought of the continental Reformers: “In this respect, we might say that the reformers were most concerned about the *public* conscience—that is, the *communal ramifications* about the exercise of one’s conscience—since the dictates of private conscience could never justify withholding from God or one’s neighbor the devotion and charity that are embodied in the public confession of faith” (Scheuers, *Consciences and the Reformation*, p. 134).

cases where the Church is stricter than the Word of God. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that a minister is correct that the Church's confession is wrong because it is overly strict. While the liberty of the man's individual conscience must be protected in regard to himself privately, the Church must also have liberty of (public) conscience to restrict that man from publicly teaching those views to the members under the Church's care.⁹⁶

I would further argue that recognizing the role of the public conscience of the Church helps to clarify the meaning of the Second Preliminary Principle: "In the exercise of this right [the Church] may, notwithstanding, err in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet even in this case, it does not infringe upon the liberty or the rights of others, but only makes an improper use of its own." This use of "improper" (i.e., incorrect) is different from what Perkins means by an "improper" (i.e., secondary) binder of conscience; however, the larger point is very similar. The Church's conscience may indeed err by being too narrow; however, the Church does not violate anyone's liberty of conscience when she restricts her ministers from teaching and preaching according to the Church's conscience. Even where the Church is improperly (in the sense of incorrectly) restricting a minister's teaching too strictly, the value of an individual's liberty of conscience does not override the value of the peace and purity of the Church as she protects her public conscience.

CONCLUSIONS FOR THE PCA FROM PERKINS ON THE CONSCIENCE

The preceding study has identified two critical issues related to the question of whether a Presbyterian pastor may teach his differences from the Church's doctrinal standards. First, Perkins notes that the Church's creeds and confessions lawfully bind consciences because they are, in substance, the Word of God. That is, the Church's creeds and confessions include both what is objectively contained in the Word of God, as well as the mind of

96. One last time, see Scheuers, who saw a similar dynamic among the continental Reformers: "Thus, for the reformers, freedom of the conscience, however much it was meant to be liberated from external, human coercion, did not entail freedom to believe and practice whatever religion one wished, or to act in ways that violated the rule of love and charity. Moreover, Christian doctrine and practice 'as taught in pulpit and classroom'—and codified in the creeds and confessions—'were matters for public agreement; consequently, they were rightfully a concern of the Christian magistrates.'" Scheuers, *Consciences and the Reformation*, pp. 67–68, citing James Kittelson, *Toward an Established Church: Strasbourg from 1500 to the Dawn of the Seventeenth Century* (Mainz: Philipp Von Zabern, 2000), p. 41.

the Church's conscience about the Word of God. Second, Perkins argues *both* that it is sin to violate the Word of God, even where conscience registers no objection, *and* that it is sin to violate conscience, even where the Word of God registers no objection. Taken together, my argument is that to treat creeds and confessions as the mind of the Church establishes the elusive point of contact for the PCA between the two principles of liberty of conscience for the minister as an individual, and the peace and purity of the Church's conscience as a collective whole. From what I have argued so far, I will offer three conclusions for a way forward in the PCA related to handling doctrinal exceptions of ministers.

First, the concept of creeds and confessions as the mind of the Church clarifies that it is a matter of protecting the Church's public conscience to restrict the teaching of doctrinal exceptions that promote what the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms* (i.e., the mind of the PCA about the Bible) would classify as sin. To admit a teaching elder who is not personally convinced of some detail(s) from the Westminster Standards as being substantially biblical is one thing, but to allow that man to teach his own views is another. To be sure, while his own conscience may not feel the weight of his personal disobedience to those aspects of God's Word, Perkins observes that an erroneous conscience does not give a man liberty to sin. The presbytery must judge, then, whether a private difference on some point may or may not lead a man into sin.

Even so, we need to give greater consideration of the significance of permitting a man to teach others against the mind of the Church about the substance of the Word of God. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* explains that for a minister to teach others to sin—whether against the explicit teaching of the Word of God, or against the conscience of the Church about the Word of God—is far more heinous than the private sin of the minister, according to multiple aggravations (WLC 150). First, the sin is more heinous "from the persons offending," since ministers are set as "guides to others," so that their "example is likely to be followed by others" (WLC 151.1). Second, the sin is aggravated "from the parties offended," since the sin of that teaching would be "against any of the saints, particularly weak brethren" (WLC 151.2). Third, "from the nature and quality of the offence," since teaching others to sin would "scandalize others," especially if done "impudently" or "boastingly" (WLC 151.3). Fourth, "from circumstances of time, and place," if the minister preaches and teaches these exceptions "on the Lord's day, or other times of divine worship," and if he does so "in public, or in the presence of others, who are thereby likely

to be provoked or defiled” (WLC 151.4). The nature of a minister’s office and work makes any advocacy against the Church’s mind about the substance of God’s Word deeply heinous through a great number of aggravations, regardless of how that minister’s conscience feels about what he is doing. Presbyteries are right to prevent ministers from preaching and teaching in violation of the conscience of the Church.

Second, however, a presbytery would be wrong to require a teaching elder to teach something contrary to his own conscience. In perfect consistency with the previous conclusion, it would be a violation of a teaching elder’s conscience to force him to teach something with a doubting conscience—even by forcing him to teach the beliefs of the mind of the Church. While, in the Church’s view, the teaching elder’s conscience may be erring and deceived on a particular point, the Church also knows that “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23), so that for the teaching elder to teach something he does not believe would be sin. To do so would also run afoul of one of the aggravations that makes a sin more heinous, by acting “against . . . conviction of conscience” (WLC 151.3). Confessional subscription and ministry within a confessional church must remain voluntary, since “the rights of private judgment in all matters that respect religion are universal and inalienable” (BCO PP #1). A presbytery cannot compel a teaching elder to preach or teach anything.

Third, aside from proving to the Church that the Church’s mind (as expressed in her creeds and confessions) is contrary to the explicit Word of God, the only other way to protect fully the individual conscience and the public conscience of the Church is for teaching elders to keep public silence regarding their doctrinal exceptions. If a church admits a man with a doctrinal exception, then that church must be content to allow the man to say nothing about those issues. While this solution of silence would not satisfy those advocating for the extreme liberty of (individual) conscience view, it offers two major advantages as a path forward for the PCA. To begin, it would create a clear criterion for a presbytery as they consider whether to permit a man a doctrinal exception on some matter: “Are we prepared for him to teach nothing on this topic?” There may very well be minor matters that are largely peripheral to pastoral ministry, where granting a man a doctrinal exception would not make much of a difference. The more central those issues become in the life of the church and pastoral ministry, however, the more obvious it becomes that admitting a man with such a significant doctrinal difference simply does not make sense for him or for the church calling him to service.

Additionally, this proposal would more strongly protect liberty of conscience among ministers of the church. Individual teaching elders would not need to teach something they did not believe. Furthermore, they would not need to worry about whether they might disturb the peace and purity of the church in teaching their doctrinal exceptions, no matter how respectfully and deferentially they may attempt to do so. Having been granted a doctrinal exception, they would be at liberty to say nothing on the matter. In more extreme cases, where men cannot in good conscience perform the basic duties of a Presbyterian minister (e.g., baptizing infants; teaching Reformed doctrine that includes limited atonement), those men should not be admitted to the Presbyterian ministry at all.⁹⁷ They should instead join other communions where they may minister freely according to their consciences *and* according to that church’s mind about what the Word of God teaches.

In this paper, I have argued that the values expressed in the First and Second Preliminary Principles of the BCO are only *seemingly* incommensurable. Understanding the creeds and confessions of the Church as the public mind of the Church clarifies how to coordinate those values. So, by drawing on the foundational work of William Perkins on the conscience, I have outlined a proposal for how the Church may protect her conscience by ensuring that ministers preach and teach in accordance with the mind of the Church, as expressed in the Church’s mind about the substance of the Word of God, as summarized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*. Where a minister is restricted from teaching his own views that conflict with the Church’s mind, the Church has not violated the man’s conscience, but only protected the Church’s conscience—regardless of whether the Church has made improper use of her rights by over-strictness. At the same time, I have argued for a greater degree of liberty of conscience for officers with doctrinal exceptions by permitting them to remain silent rather than forcing them to teach contrary to their own consciences.

Through the purifying blood of Jesus Christ, may the Lord continue to sanctify the consciences of individual members and ministers within the PCA, for the building up of the conscience of the Church as a whole! ■

97. “Infant Baptism (WCF 28–4) and Limited Atonement (WCF 3–3, 8–5 and 11–4) are to be considered fundamentals of the system of doctrine and that there can be no exceptions given in the case of officers in the church.” (“Case 90–8, T. E. David Bowen vs. Eastern Carolina Presbytery,” in *Minutes of the 19th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* [Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1991], p. 84.)