

On Being A Non-Subscribing Presbyterian



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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John Nelson is minister of the Old Presbyterian Church Ballycarry and of Raloo Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, and has served these congregations since Ordination in 1983. He is a graduate of Queen's University Belfast and of the Victoria University of Manchester, and holds the degrees of B.A., B.D. and Ph.D. in history and theology. Over the years he has served the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland in various capacities including Clerk of the General Synod 1988-2000 and Clerk of the Presbytery of Antrim from 1986 until present.

Scott Peddie

Scott Peddie is minister of the Old Presbyterian Church Templepatrick and First Presbyterian Church (Non-Subscribing) Crumlin. Educated in Scotland, New Zealand and latterly Northern Ireland, Scott has a B.Sc. in Marine Biology, an M.Sc. in Business Management, a Ph.D. in Marine Biology (all from the University of Aberdeen), a GradCertTh in Theology (BCNZ) and is currently studying part-time for a M.Div degree at the Queen's University of Belfast. He is a Chartered Biologist (C.Biol M.I.Biol) and a Member of the Institute of Leadership and Management (MInstLM). Scott has worked for a number of years in management and research positions within the Scottish, Norwegian, Irish and New Zealand aquaculture industries and has also spent some time working as an animal health economist. He has been a Director of a consultancy, training and publishing business for the last five years. Scott has authored in excess of seventy scientific articles and papers. He is co-founder and chair of Christians in Science Ireland. Scott is married to Fiona and they have two sons.

David Steers

David Steers is minister of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Churches of Downpatrick, Ballee and Clough in Co. Down. He was Dr Williams's Research Scholar at the University of Glasgow from 2000 to 2003 and tutored in the School of Divinity there for two years. Since 1990 he has also been Non-Subscribing Presbyterian chaplain at Queen's University, Belfast. He read modern history at the University of Oxford (Christ Church) before reading theology at the University of Manchester while training for the ministry. He holds a Ph.D from the University of Glasgow and is the editor of *The Non-Subscribing Presbyterian* magazine. He was a member of the Council of the International Association for Religious Freedom for ten years and was minister of All Souls' Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, Belfast from 1989 to 2000. He has contributed articles to a number of different journals as well as to biographical dictionaries including the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, the *Thoemmes Dictionary of Nineteenth Century British Philosophers*, the *Thoemmes Dictionary of British Classicists* and the *Thoemmes Dictionary of Irish Philosophers*. He is married to Sue and they have four children.

For some time past we have been aware of a lack of published material which might give insight into the principles of Non-Subscribing Presbyterians, and we have put together the following brief articles.

The views expressed are the entire responsibility of those whose names are attached. Where there appears to be duplication of thought this is because the articles were written separately and should be taken as complimenting each other.

In offering then to those who may be interested we hope that they will find them of some value, and that they will help to increase their understanding of the liberal Christianity of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterians.

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J.W. Nelson
S. Peddie
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INTRODUCTION

The Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland has no exact equivalent in any other denomination. In structure and church governance it closely resembles the rest of Irish Presbyterianism, with which its roots and development were closely connected. Its theological outlook and ethos also reflect in a large degree that background, and its reaction to certain aspects of the often rigid and conservative outlook that have been found there.

The title of the denomination is unwieldy, yet at the same time thoroughly descriptive. During the controversies of the 1720's and the 1820's the fundamental issue which decided whether ministers and congregations would be with or against the 'Non-Subscribers' was their willingness to accept compulsory subscription to the 'Westminster Confession of Faith'.

In their refusal to accept compulsory subscription the Non-Subscribers have often been portrayed as rejecting or disbelieving some parts of the Westminster Confession. However, this is not the case. Their refusal has always been based upon an objection in principle to the use of man-made creeds or confessions as a test of Christian faith and fellowship. They have always contended that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain all that is essential to Christian knowledge and faith. Man-made creeds and confessions cannot become a definitive explanation of what Scripture teaches and any attempt to impose them as such, upon individuals or churches will inevitably lead to needless division.

The point is also made by others that the title of the denomination appears as something which is essentially negative. Because of this, Non-Subscribers have always considered it important to stress that which is positive.

Non-subscribers hold that 'The Lord Jesus Christ is the sole King and Head of the church'. That is, that their faith looks to Him and is centred upon Him, that through His ministry and revelation they may learn the meaning of life and seek the way to heaven.

Non-Subscribers hold that 'The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the rule of Christian Faith and Duty under the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is, that together with the other churches of Christendom, they base their faith and practice upon inspired truth given there.

In placing their trust upon the Scriptures the Non-Subscribers also assert the place of human reason in the study and understanding of their faith. While accepting that mankind are frail and imperfect in many ways, they acknowledge that they have been given the gift of reason; and since God gave mankind this gift He clearly meant them to use it, and not merely for limited areas of thought only, but for all, including

their faith. In this way they believe that God expects his people to engage with matters of faith and form a deeper understanding.

Non-Subscribers also hold 'That it is the inalienable right of every Christian to search these records of Divine Truth for their own instruction and guidance, to form their own opinions with regard to what they teach, and to worship God in sincerity, agreeably to the dictates of their own conscience.' That is, the right of private judgement has a most important place in the Christian life. Each Christian has the duty, and the obligation, to search the Scriptures and with study, prayer and the advice of other Christians to form their own opinion as to what they teach. In as much as Christianity is built around personal relationships between God and people it is the duty of each individual to strive to the best of their ability to understand that relationship and not simply to accept what others may say.

Given such an emphasis upon personal responsibility, it is inevitable that different views may emerge. Nevertheless, Non-Subscribers have never sought to make the basis of their fellowship agreement upon the details of theological belief, but rather their faith in God as He has revealed himself in Christ, and their quest to find the love and salvation which he offers.

In such ways the Non-Subscribing Presbyterians of Ireland have for almost 300 years, maintained their witness to liberal and non-dogmatic Christianity and, by their maintenance of that witness have demonstrated that God has surely a place for them in His plans and purpose.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES:

Rev. Dr. John Nelson

The Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland is not large in numbers. Nowadays its strength is largely confined to Counties Antrim and Down; yet it maintains an historic witness to liberal, non-dogmatic Christianity.

This church has its origins firmly in the mainstream of Irish Presbyterianism and only took on a separate existence after the Non-Subscription Controversies of the 1720's and 1820's. Its form of worship is characteristically Presbyterian, as is its form of church government. Its distinctive title comes from its refusal, in contrast to other Presbyterian churches, to enforce subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith upon its ministers and elders.

It is sadly the case that this church is often misunderstood.

To be a Non-Subscriber is to be part of a church which proclaims the Lord Jesus Christ as sole King and Head, and bases its faith and practice upon the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; and by doing so it claims its place among the churches of Christendom.

To be a Non-Subscriber is to be part of a church which, as a point of principle, will not insist that its ministers and elders sign or 'subscribe' the Westminster Confession of Faith or some equivalent creed. Believing in the unique position of the Bible by reason of Divine inspiration Non-Subscribers do not accept that the Bible must then be interpreted through a man-made creed or confession of faith. They reject the view that it is either proper or effective to then use such a creed as a test of membership or office in the church. They believe that it would be wrong to bind everyone to the form of words of one such creed, and that to do so would only lead to needless division in the church.

Nevertheless this is not to say that Non-Subscribers reject creeds and confessions for they do not. They feel that they have a most important and valuable role as testimony to the historic faith and witness of the church and as guides to the faith of present and future generations. It is not the use of creeds which Non-Subscribers object to, but their being imposed as compulsory test of church membership. Indeed, it is the tradition of this church that while subscription is never imposed, all who may wish to declare their faith in this way have perfect liberty to do so.

To be a Non-Subscriber is to be part of a church which values mankind as the pinnacle of God's creation, made in his own image, and which accepts that while mankind are frail and imperfect in many ways they can still recognise their need for God and reach up to him. God, in his loving kindness reaches out to them in Christ

and so opens that path of salvation. To aid in this quest God has blessed mankind with reason, which they may use, indeed must use, in understanding their faith.

To be a Non-Subscriber is to be part of a church which affirms the right of private judgement in matters of religion. That is, that it is the right and duty of every Christian to search the Scriptures and with study, prayer and the advice of other Christians, to form their own opinion as to what they teach. Inasmuch as Christianity is built around a personal relationship between God and man it is the duty of each individual to try to the best of their ability to understand that relationship, and not, to receive and accept blindly what any church, council or individuals may say.

Given this emphasis upon individual responsibility it is inevitable that different views may emerge. There are those who hold views of Christian doctrine which are not entirely in keeping with mainstream or 'orthodox' views. Nevertheless it must be noted that when they do so they act only as individuals, and that their views are not binding upon either the denomination or any of its congregations. This church does not deny the doctrine of the Trinity or any of the other major doctrines commonly accepted among Christians. It simply leaves to individuals the duty of working out for themselves the details of those beliefs. The outstanding fact is that in spite of diversity of detail the church finds its unity in Jesus Christ and in loving allegiance to Him. This surely is evidence of the work of the Spirit.

To be a Non-Subscriber is to be part of a church which seeks to bring people nearer to God as he has revealed himself in Jesus, that with the help of the Spirit they might be better able to live in this modern world, and may come to find his salvation.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES:

Rev. Dr. Scott Peddie

Although the title 'Non-Subscribing Presbyterian' is undoubtedly an unwieldy one, the rationale for it, and the principles that underpin it, are very straightforward.

In essence, the 'Non-Subscribing' Presbyterian is one who is against *compulsory* subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith, or any Confession of Faith for that matter. It does not necessarily follow however that a 'Non-Subscriber' is 'unorthodox' in his or her theological thinking; this is an erroneous assumption that cannot be sustained by a detailed examination of the rationale behind non-subscription. Non-Subscribers can be as theologically 'orthodox' as those who choose to subscribe to a confession of faith, although they simply articulate their faith in a non-formulaic manner devoid of compulsion. For many, their objection to compulsory subscription hinges on the fact that it has the effect of stifling debate, creating false intellectual boundaries, and it can and sometimes does create an artificial theological 'comfort zone', however unintentional this may be.

Creeds, like confessions, are limited in their expression of the totality of Divine truth. For example, they are silent on much of Jesus' teaching and his revolutionary stance on ethical issues. The centrality of love in the Christ's message is entirely absent and his teaching on the Kingdom of God is not given the prominence he himself gave it in his earthly ministry.

Truth is of course fundamental to all Christians of whatever persuasion. We all earnestly seek the truth; truth is absolute, but as fallible humans our *perception* of it is limited and it must be open to revision. Creeds and confessions are attempts to distil the unfathomable nature of God into timeless 'soundbites' of theological truths, but by their very nature, they are products of their time and reflective of the theological controversies that were important at their time of composition. As a consequence, utilising confessions and creeds as barometers of orthodoxy is not only intellectually incoherent, it is also incompatible with the spirit of the Reformation. As William Sloane Coffin once said:

"There are those who prefer certainty to truth, those in church who put the purity of dogma ahead of the integrity of love. And what distortion of the gospel it is to have limited sympathies and unlimited certainties, when the very reverse - to have limited certainties and unlimited sympathies - is not only the more tolerant but far more Christian."

Non-Subscribers understand that focussing in on the purity of dogma ahead of the integrity of love is something that turns many people away from God. There are those who are genuinely seeking to follow Jesus in their lives, but they become disillusioned and disheartened by a rigid doctrinal exposition of faith, something

that, incidentally, is contrary to Christ's message. Not only that, it has tragic consequences, whereby people are turned away from Jesus rather than being drawn towards him. The working principle of the Non-Subscriber therefore, is to strive to be inclusive in our fellowship. Our understanding is that by being inclusive, all things are possible through God's grace; those who exclude limit those possibilities and this is surely contrary to God's will. Although our congregations and ministers are diverse in their theological beliefs, we are all bound together by a common understanding that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are all that is required to foster true Christian knowledge and the correct expression of that faith.

Non-Subscribers, with their liberal and non-dogmatic approach to faith articulate a positive message to the wider Christian community in Ireland. By creating worshipping communities that are modern and responsive to people's needs, by addressing ethical and social issues and to demonstrate that Jesus is as relevant to us here and now as he's ever been, Non-Subscribers have a unique opportunity to continue their vibrant Christian witness well in to the 21st Century and beyond. By connecting with people from all walks of life, and by appealing to those who are in the words of the retired Episcopalian Bishop of Edinburgh 'dancing on the edge' of Christianity, to accept and to welcome them in to our fellowship just as they are, and to work with them in their journey of faith and discipleship, that is the task undertaken by the modern day Non-Subscribing Presbyterian.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES:

Rev. Dr. David Steers

This is a shortened version of an article originally published in 'A Free Faith' (Belfast 1994).

The Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland is quite a mouthful of a title to give to any denomination. It doesn't trip of the tongue very easily. If a team of advertising executives was given the job of improving the image of the Church the first thing they would probably do is suggest a new, snappier name. But, of course, that is the name that history has given us, and while it sometimes causes confusion – some people really do believe that non-subscription implies not making any financial contribution – it is still an accurate description of the position adopted by the Church.

It is a Non-Subscribing Church in that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries its members refused to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. They held to the point of view that the Bible was the sole rule of faith and the imposition of anything from outside it was wrong.

So the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church is an historical Church. Its roots go far back across the centuries indeed many of its churches date their origins to the 17th and 18th centuries.

But what of the faith of a Non-Subscriber in the world today?

Non-Subscribers have always emphasised both today and historically that they stand by the Bible. Of course, we understand the Bible in different ways today than we might have done one or two hundred years ago but the centrality of the Bible remains unchanged.

This is reflected in the Constitution of the Church which with its opening clause states: "That the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the Rule of Christian Faith and Duty under the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ". This clause is followed up with two further clauses that emphasise the right of people to form and hold their own opinions as well as rejecting the imposition of human tests and confessions.

So according to our own Church Constitution the Bible remains paramount, interpreted under the teachings of Jesus, but it is for each person to understand it for him or herself.

It is interesting to note that if you look at the Constitution you will see that the fourth clause quotes a number of passages from the Bible. Someone of a particularly legalistic or pedantic mind might want to argue that in doing this there is an element of contradiction here, since it is in one breath stating that the Scriptures as a whole

are the central documents of the faith and it is the right of everyone to search them for themselves, and then in the next breath it is selecting some portions that are presumably the most important and to be particularly noted.

The clause actually cites three passages all from the Gospels, and all of them sayings of Jesus. But whatever we might want to say about the way the constitution is put together everyone would probably agree that the quotations are a good selection of verses which do say something about the general outlook of our denomination. I would like to look at one of these short passages and what it means in relation to our witness today.

The passage comes from Matthew chapter 7 verse 21: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven". This is just one item of the teaching of Jesus given in the Sermon on the Mount. It links in very closely with the earlier verse about being known by your fruit - "every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit". Fruit is not what someone says but what they do, and we are judged by our deeds rather than words.

This is a very direct and straightforward statement that almost needs no explanation. That is why it was included in the Constitution. There is a parallel passage in Luke's Gospel which puts it even more directly: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" A great deal of our attitude is summed up in that statement - that we believe in the teachings of Jesus rather than the teachings about Jesus, that we believe that faith without works is dead. In the end I think it is good that that passage should be highlighted because to try and take it seriously is to move away from religion that is concerned only in saying the right words to one that is about living life as it should be lived in accordance with Jesus' teaching.

In the end religion has to be about life rather than statements and about faith rather than belief to be of any value at all.

It was George Bernard Shaw who said: "You can tell a man's creed not by what he says he believes but by the assumptions under which he habitually acts".

But also bound up at the back of this passage is the idea of judgement. Entering the kingdom of heaven is linked to being true. In the end any pretence or disguise will be stripped away. We might be able to deceive other people with our words but we cannot deceive God: "Thou discernest my thoughts from afar" says the Psalmist (Psalm 139 verse 2). But by the same token we shouldn't try to fit a picture of judgement day to this but rather recognise that the judgement of God comes to us through ourselves.

As Emerson once wrote:

Thus in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire...If a man dissemble, deceive, he deceives himself, and goes out of acquaintance with his own being. Character is always known...The least admixture of a lie...will instantly vitiate the effect. But speak the truth, and all things alive or brute are witnesses, and the very roots of the grass underground there do seem to stir and move to bear your witness.

But maybe, in some senses, this is to read too much into the passage from Matthew. At root it is most certainly a simple statement about religion being a practical rather than a doctrinal thing. A saying of Jesus that takes us away from creeds and written formulations of faith and points is to the way we live and are.

But this isn't the only way it could be understood. Other people might want to argue for a different interpretation. Indeed some see this section as entwined with notions of obedience not just to Jesus' teachings but to whatever notions they have about his personal status with regard to God. They assume that to call Jesus Lord you must agree with the detailed creedal claims that are made about him. For them it does quite the opposite than it might do for us. Whereas I would suggest that passages like this show how unnecessary and unhelpful creeds are, they would see them as just strengthening their own belief in their church's creed.

In the end though, to do this, I feel sure, is to read back into the original words of Jesus something that wasn't there. His whole ministry exhibited a concern not for outward appearances but for inner experience and commitment.

All this is very adequately summed up in our Constitution:

We, therefore, refuse to impose conditions upon the Church which He himself has not sanctioned, and we solemnly declare our allegiance to the principle, as the real bond of union among Christians, that the teaching of Christ himself must take precedence over the doctrines of a later time, and that unity is to be sought, not in uniformity or creed, but in a common standard of righteousness and obedience to the commandments which Christ himself laid down.

This was written for our Constitution in 1910 although it reflects thinking that is much older. It seems to me that to be a very true and important observation that is plainly correct. However, the story of Christianity runs quite contrary to this - Churches have always been busy assembling creeds, very often to be used, not to promote unity, but to keep other people out.

There has been almost an inevitability about this as the earliest statements or confessions of belief which were really very simple, possibly spontaneous remarks were gradually expanded into something else. It is interesting to note that Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contains what is generally regarded as the very earliest

Christian statement of belief, namely "Jesus is Lord". This phrase comes in the passage as Paul tries to explain the varieties of the gifts of the Spirit. As a confession of faith it could not possibly be simpler and it is thought to be the sort of statement that was made at a person's baptism.

However, statements such as this tended to get enlarged partly through the very reasonable result of people looking at the life and ministry of Jesus and reflecting on what it all meant in every aspect. They also got enlarged, though, because people started turning such statements into passages that could be used in worship by all in the congregation. As one writer has pointed out they moved from passages that usually begin by saying "I believe" to ones that said "We believe". Once this had happened it was just a short step before some Church leaders started to punish those who could not join in with some parts of the creed. After that it was an even shorter step to go to a situation where people actually started drawing up creeds so that they could define certain brands of belief as being utterly wrong and heretical.

And that is why we don't agree with creeds. Not because we believe that the Nicene Creed, or the Apostle's Creed for instance, is wrong necessarily but because they always end up as being yardsticks by which people's faith are measured and this goes against the spirit of Jesus.

In the end a creed can only be a sort of hypothesis about God which because of both our nature and the nature of God must always be expressed in cautious and also personal terms. A creed in this sense is clearly a good thing but when they are made into a fixed, unalterable piece of dogma then they become damaging to the cause which they seek to promote.

In following this kind of approach we cast our faith in terms that are non-dogmatic and do not seek to impose forms of words on individual Christians.