

FORMULA OF SUBSCRIPTION

Introduction to the

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The Formula of Subscription arose out of a desire to preserve unity in the church, which unity is based squarely on oneness in doctrine. One who subscribes to (signs) this form expresses his agreement with the confession of the church.

History. Early in their history, the Reformed churches displayed great concern for unity and doctrinal purity by requiring the ministers to sign the two existing creeds—the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession. The great Synod of Dordrecht (1618-19) drew up a formula of subscription and required (in the Church Order, Articles 53 and 54) ministers, professors of theology, and school masters to sign it. The same synod however left to the discretion of the individual classes the question of whether and how the elders should subscribe. In practice, the elders often did so, and the Christian Reformed Church in America, just four years after her organization in 1857, officially decided that “the formulas are to be unconditionally subscribed by ministers, elders, deacons, and teachers.” Thus Article 54 of the church order was changed by the Christian Reformed Church to require elders and deacons to subscribe, and the form was altered to include them. This is the form adopted and still in use by the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Content. The Formula of Subscription includes four elements. First, it expresses complete agreement with all the articles and doctrines of the three Reformed creeds, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordrecht. Secondly, the form states a promise to teach and defend these doctrines. Thirdly, it contains a promise to combat all errors contrary to these confessions in order to keep the church free from them. Finally, it expresses a promise to be honest in the churches in all matters of doctrine, so that if a subscriber later changes his mind or has doubts on any doctrines, he promises not to promote them, but to bring it to the attention of his consistory, and to submit to the judgment of the consistory, classis, and synod.

Importance. The Formula of Subscription requires complete agreement with all the doctrines contained in the Reformed creeds. Over the years attempts have been made by various Reformed churches to soften this declaration of complete agreement with the doctrines. The result has been accelerated apostasy in such churches. Time and again the faithful remnant returned to this form, as, for example, the 1834 Secession and the 1886

Doleantie under Dr. Abraham Kuyper. Thus it is of utmost importance for the unity and purity of the church that all officebearers who sign the formula of subscription do so with no reservations whatsoever, and that the church hold them to their promises. Doctrinal purity is vital for the existence of the church, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). She can expect God's blessing in no other way.



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- 134 We, the undersigned, professors of the Protestant Reformed Churches, ministers of the gospel, elders and deacons of the Protestant Reformed congregation of....., of Classis do hereby sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord declare by this, our subscription, that we heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Churches, together with the explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-'19, do fully agree with the Word of God.

We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same, by our public preaching or writing.

- 135 We declare, moreover, that we not only reject all errors that militate against this doctrine, and particularly those which were condemned by the above mentioned synod, but that we are disposed to refute and contradict these, and to exert ourselves in keeping the church free from such errors. And if hereafter any difficulties or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrines should arise in our minds, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend the same, either by preaching or writing, until we have first revealed such sentiments to the consistory, classis, and synod, that the same may be there examined, being ready always cheerfully to submit to the judgment of the consistory, classis, and synod, under the penalty in case of refusal to be, by that very fact, suspended from our office.

- 136 And further, if at any time the consistory, classis, or synod, upon sufficient grounds of suspicion and to preserve the uniformity and purity of doctrine, may deem it proper to require of us a further explanation of our sentiments respecting any particular article of the Confession of Faith, the Catechism, or the explanation of the national synod, we do hereby promise to be always willing and ready to comply with such requisition, under the penalty above mentioned, reserving for ourselves, however, the right of an appeal, whenever we shall believe ourselves aggrieved by the sentence of the consistory, the classis, or the synod, and until a decision is made upon such an appeal, we will acquiesce in the determination and judgment already passed.