

Notes on Scruples in Annotated Book of Order (2025)

PJC ([2008, 218-10, 319, Bush et al. v. Pby of Pittsburgh](#)): 1) Candidate and examining body must follow [G-6.0108](#) [now G-2.0105] in determining whether the candidate has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity.

PJC 2) No pby may grant an exception to any mandatory church wide behavioral ordination standard.

PJC 3) Violations of behavioral standards must be addressed through repentance and reconciliation. [G-6.0108](#) [now G-2.0105] does not permit disobedience to those behavioral standards.

PJC 4) [G-6.0106b](#) [now 2.0104b] may be interpreted by GA and GAPJC but may only be changed by constitutional amendment.

PJC 5) Gov bodies have the responsibility to determine whether any "**scruples**" declared by candidates constitute serious departures from doctrine or polity.

Book of Order

Item 08-05. On Reorganizing and Improving the Presentation of G-2.0300, G-2.0400, and G-2.0500 Without Material Alteration to its Actual Content—From the Presbytery of John Calvin. *ACC +OGA +GAC

In response to this recommendation, the 216th General Assembly (2004) approved the following statement:

The 216th General Assembly (2004) affirms the right and responsibility of presbyteries to determine whether candidates and ministers “sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church,” together with all other matters expressed in ordination and installation vows.

Ordination vows and essential tenets have a long and complex history in the Presbyterian church. The church has worked through the issue of “essential tenets” many times before, so attention to that history is essential.

From the beginning, the church has lived in the space between two tendencies. One stressed the more “objective” aspects of Christian faith such as theological precision, the distinct character of the ministry, and ordered church government. The other placed more emphasis on spontaneity, vital experience, and adaptability. In 1729, division was averted by recognizing the concerns of both groups in the “Adopting Act.” The Adopting Act required:

1. *That all ministers and candidates accept the Westminster Confession, together with the Larger and Shorter catechisms . . .*
2. *. . . but not categorically.*
3. *That all ministers and candidates must declare “agreement in and approbation of” the confessional standards “as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine.”*
4. *That any minister who did not accept any particular part of the Confession or catechisms should state his **scruple** concerning that part, and the presbytery should then decide whether or not the **scruple** involved “essential and necessary articles of faith.”*

The Adopting Act regularized confessional standards, but it did not require adherence to every confessional articulation. “Essential and necessary articles” were not identified. The Adopting Act was refined in 1758 at the repair of the Old Side/New Side schism:

1. *With respect to any action deemed essential and necessary by the church, “every member shall actively concur . . . or passively submit . . . or peaceably withdraw.”*
2. *It became a censurable offense irresponsibly to accuse other ministers.*
3. *Presbyteries were to examine candidates on “religious experience” as well as doctrine.*
4. *Five questions were to be asked at ordinations and installations, including, “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the confession of faith of this church as contained in the system of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures?” The “system of doctrine” was interpreted in the spirit of “essential and necessary.”*

The 1910 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America declared that the Adopting Act of 1729 called upon judicatories to determine which articles of faith are “essential and necessary.” The assembly then identified five doctrines as “essential” (although the assembly added, “others are equally so.”) (1) inerrancy of Scripture, (2) virgin birth, (3) sacrificial atonement, (4) bodily resurrection, (5) Christ’s miracles.

Although the 1910 deliverance was challenged repeatedly, it was not repealed. Following the 1923 General Assembly, and in reaction against the 1910/1916/1923 doctrinal deliverance, more than 1,200 ministers signed the “Auburn Affirmation” declaring that the five-point deliverance

attempts to commit our church to certain theories concerning the Inspiration of the Bible, and the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and the Continuing Life and Supernatural Power of our Lord Jesus Christ. We all hold most earnestly to these great facts and doctrines... Some of us regard the particular themes contained in the deliverance

of the General Assembly of 1923 as satisfactory explanations of these facts and doctrines. But we are united in believing that these are not the only themes allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines of our religion, and that all who hold to these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of our confidence and fellowship.

The issue was set: narrowly defined confessional subscription or broadly defined confessional subscription. The question was not whether confessional subscription was required, but the specific nature of that confessional subscription.

The matter was referred to a special commission that reported in 1926 and 1927. The upshot of the special commission's report, adopted by the 1927 General Assembly, was that:

1. The General Assembly does not have the constitutional power to give binding definition to the church's essential faith. By denying that the assembly has the right to define authoritatively the "essentials" of the church's faith, the commission eliminated the five points as a source of controversy.

2. While a measure of tolerance was embedded in the church, it was made clear that the church, and not the individual, must decide the limits of tolerated diversity, "either generally, by amendment to the constitution, or particularly, by Presbyterial authority."

The church has decided limits *generally*, by amending the constitution to create *The Book of Confessions*, and particularly, by the continuing examination for ordination of candidates and for reception into membership of ministers. To this end, it must be acknowledged that in ordination the presbytery has historically demonstrated its power and responsibility in determining confirmation with the church's theology.

Example in Chicago Presbytery –

- Minister to be installed did not want to promise to "uphold the peace, unity, and purity of the church." Declared a scruple regarding the word "purity."
- COM and individual researched this word in scripture and confessions.
- Minister believed many defined purity in sense of whiteness, sexual purity in heterosexual relationships only, and in other strict ways. This minister stated he would not affirm "purity" of the church if this was the understanding of "purity."
- COM research revealed purity in scripture and confessions as a matter of devotion, when one is "pure in heart."
- Ministry declared this scruple. COM members agreed understanding of purity was tied to devotion to God, Jesus, and the Spirit – and was not, in the church, tied in any way to whiteness or sexual purity.
- COM took action to approve installation of this minister.
- Minister affirmed this ordination vow – question when installed.