

Presbytery of Southern New England

Scruples 101

A scruple is defined as:

1. A very small quantity, amount, or part
2. An ancient Roman weight equal to 1/24 of an ounce
3. A feeling of hesitancy, doubt, uneasiness arising from difficulty in deciding what is right, proper, ethical, etc; a qualm of misgiving about something one thinks is wrong

The Thesaurus says: misgiving, doubt, qualm, compunction, hesitation, regret, second thought, pang of conscience.

Scruples involve beliefs, attitudes, and actions that are statements of disagreement with our polity or confessions.

What is a “scruple” in the PSNE/PCUSA context?

In order to honor both the Presbyterian principle of “freedom of conscience” for the individual and communal discernment by the church body, American Presbyterians in the 18th century allowed individuals to declare a “scruple” concerning subscription to the Westminster Standards. The presbytery would then determine if the “scruple” was acceptable within the bounds of the church’s confessional theology. Versions of that practice have been used in more recent years in ministerial examination and are now suggested again as a way of discerning the appropriate shape of both uniform standards and individual conscience. Declaration of a “scruple” initiates a serious conversation between candidate and presbytery. The authoritative interpretative does not use the term. However, what is required is in 5 c. 1) and 2):

The General Assembly approved Item #5 of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Report *as amended*:

“5. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the 217th General Assembly (2006) approve the following authoritative interpretation of section G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order*:

- a. *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government of the *Book of Order* set forth the scriptural and constitutional standards for ordination and installation.
- b. These standards are determined by the whole church, after the careful study of Scripture and theology, solely by the constitutional process of approval by the General Assembly with the approval of the presbyteries. These standards may be interpreted by the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission.
- c. Ordaining and installing bodies, acting as corporate expressions of the church, have the responsibility to determine their membership by applying these standards to those elected to office. These determinations include:
 - 1) Whether a candidate being examined for ordination and/or installation as elder, deacon, or minister of Word and Sacrament has departed from scriptural and constitutional standards for fitness for office,
 - 2) Whether any departure constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order*, thus barring the candidate from ordination and/or installation.
- d. Whether the examination and ordination and installation decision comply with the constitution of the PCUSA, and whether the ordaining/installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies.
- e. All parties should endeavor to outdo one another in honoring one another’s decisions, according to the presumption of wisdom to ordaining/installing bodies in examining candidates and to the General Assembly, with presbyteries’ approval, in setting standards.”

The PCUSA does not have a list of “essentials of the Reformed faith and practice.” We have a confessional foundation and it is the responsibility of the ordaining body to determine what tenets of faith are essential and then make decisions about ordination and installation.

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Questions:

What areas are included in “scriptural and constitutional standards for fitness for office” and “Reformed faith and polity”?

All areas covered by the constitutional questions to officers (G-14.0405 b. for ministers).

Does this include belief? ..behavior? rules of church governance?

Yes.

Does the body have a duty to inquire into beliefs and practices?

Yes.

An ordaining or installing body may wish to ask all candidates the same question.

Some presbyteries ask “Are you able to answer the constitutional questions in the affirmative?” probing the candidate’s understanding of the affirmations she or he is asked to make and following up on areas of concern.

If an examination reveals a departure, is the candidate barred from ordination or installation?

Not necessarily. The body then must determine “Whether any departure constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order*, thus barring the candidate from ordination and/or installation”.

The decision of the body is subject to review (see 5. d).

How does the body determine whether the departure is such an essential?

The wise session and presbytery committee will devote serious time to study, prayer, discernment, and discussion about what constitutes essentials Reformed faith and polity before the time comes for the examination of a candidate.

Have the standards for ordination changed with this action?

No. The scriptural and constitutional standards for ordination and installation remain unchanged. G-6.0106 defines gifts and requirements for those called to ministry and G-14.0405b lists the nine questions asked at the time of ordination.

What are the responsibilities of the session, Committee on Preparation for Ministry, Committee on Ministry, and Presbytery in examining candidates for office?

To “reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately” apply scriptural and constitutional standards for ordination and installation to each person being considered for ordination or installation.

In the case of those preparing for ministry of Word and Sacrament, it is very important that this occurs throughout the preparation process beginning very early, not be implemented only at the time of final assessment and examination.

Must every candidate affirm the question “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do”

Yes

May a candidate declare a scruple on a mandatory provision?

An individual may declare a scruple concerning the appropriateness of a mandatory provision.

But a governing body cannot excuse a mandatory provision, for it lacks the power to set aside a provision of the *Constitution*. However, a candidate may still be ordained or installed so long as she/he is still willing to comply with the mandatory provisions.

Key points to remember are:

- The standards are still the standards.
- Neither COM nor CPM has the authority to declare a scruple as “not essential.”
- Scruples do not give a “pass” on behavior.