

1 **OVERTURE 17** from the Presbytery of the Ascension (to CCB, OC)
2 “Amend *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21-5”
3

4 **Whereas**, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 21:5, contains no reference to
5 collections as either an ordinary element of worship or as an occasional element of
6 worship, and
7

8 **Whereas**, this absence is almost certainly due to the establishment and maintenance of the
9 church in seventeenth century England by the civil magistrate, and
10

11 **Whereas** the New Testament teaches that such collections were regular parts of the
12 Christian assemblies under the oversight and direction of the apostles (Acts 2:42, 1
13 Corinthians 16:1-2); and
14

15 **Whereas**, the almost-uniform practice of our churches is to take a collection during
16 worship; and
17

18 **Whereas**, the one reference to a “tithe” in the *PCA Book of Church Order*:

- 19
20 1) is in a non-constitutionally binding section (54-1),
21 2) differs, for substance, with previous Presbyterian deliverances
22 -such as the 1854 Assembly’s reference to the tithe as “presumption,”
23 -such as the 1933 language of “worthy portion”
24

1933 (PCUS BCO 336)
that this acknowledgement should
take the form, in part, of giving *a*
worthy portion of our income

PCA 54-1
that this acknowledgement should
take the form, in part, of giving *at*
least a tithe of our income

25
26 **Be it therefore resolved**, that Presbytery of the Ascension overtures the Forty-first General
27 Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America to begin the process of amending
28 *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21:5 by the addition of the italicized words as
29 follows:
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31 The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching
32 and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with
33 understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in
34 the heart; *collections for the work of the church*, as also, the due
35 administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by
36 Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside
37 religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special
38 occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in
39 an holy and religious manner.
40

1 **And be it further resolved**, that a three-part minute explanatory be placed in the minutes,
2 as follows:

3
4 The addition of the words “collections for the work of the church” to
5 *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21:5 by the 41st General Assembly
6 is intended to permit collections to be taken as part of religious
7 worship. These words are not designed, however, to resolve any of
8 the following three matters, which are deliberately left unaddressed
9 and unsettled by this language:

- 10
11 1) Whether such collections must be taken during the service itself,
12 or before or after the service;
13 2) What “the work of the church” includes (e.g. diaconal relief of the
14 unchurched);
15 3) What liturgical language may be employed for this element (e.g.,
16 “offering,” “collection,” “tithe” et al.).

17
18
19 RATIONALE

20 Historical Considerations

21
22 Due to the Erastian circumstances under which the Westminster Standards were written, the
23 church was established and maintained by the civil magistrate, and funds necessary for the
24 church’s work were provided by government taxation. When the American churches dis-
25 established religion by amending the chapter on the civil magistrate in 1787-88, other means
26 were necessary, and were provided for in the various *Books of Church Order*, such as the
27 PCUS *BCO* of 1933, which was the primary basis of the PCA *BCO*. This 1933 book reads
28 as follows:
29

30 336. The Holy Scriptures teach that God is the owner of all persons and all
31 things and that we are but stewards of both life and possessions; that God’s
32 ownership and our stewardship should be acknowledged; that this
33 acknowledgement should take the form, in part, of giving *a worthy portion* of
34 our income and other offerings to the work of the Lord through the Church of
35 Jesus Christ, thus worshipping the Lord with our possessions; and that the
36 remainder should be used as *becometh* Christians.
37

38 Such constitutional provisions for collections in worship had appeared before, and by 1933
39 the practice was common, if not universal. When the PCA was established in 1973, it
40 adopted with several changes the 1933 PCUS constitution as its own, but altered section 336
41 to replace “a worthy portion of our income” with “at least a tithe of our income” (*BCO* 54-1).
42 Two difficulties then attended the situation in the PCA.
43

44 First, chapter 54 does not enjoy “full constitutional authority” (only chapters 56-58
45 enjoy such authority within the Directory for Worship). Therefore, there is currently no

1 place within our constitutional standards that permits a collection to be taken as part of
2 Christian worship.
3

4 Second, the changes made to section 336 of the 1933 *BCO* are out of accord with the
5 previous history of Presbyterianism, and therefore are unsatisfactory to many within the
6 PCA. The 19th chapter of the *Westminster Confession* recognizes a threefold distinction
7 within the Old Testament Law: moral, ceremonial, and civil. “Moral” is the term used to
8 designate those commands in the Mosaic law that are general and permanent, whereas
9 “ceremonial” and “civil” are terms used to designate two portions of the Mosaic law that
10 were specific and temporary (with the exception of those parts of the “civil” law that may
11 have been of “general equity”). Therefore, Mosaic laws that were inextricably related to the
12 ceremonial law were deemed to have been abrogated, and many people, such as John Owen,
13 judged the tithe to have been such an inextricably ceremonial law:
14

15 I shall take leave to say, that it is no safe plea for many to insist on, that tithes
16 are due and divine, as they speak,--that is, by a binding law of God,--now
17 under the gospel....The precise law of tithing is not confirmed in the
18 gospel....it is impossible any one certain rule should be prescribed unto all
19 persons (*Works*, vol. 21, pp. 324, 325).
20

21 This was the judgment also of the Old School General Assembly of 1854, which adopted as
22 its own the paper first written for Baltimore Presbytery by Stuart Robinson and Thomas E.
23 Peck. This paper said the following, in part:
24

25 So, under the gospel, the point upon which our “free will” is to be exercised
26 is, not as to the *giving*, but as to the *amount*. God has not said, “Give me a
27 tenth, or a twentieth, or a hundredth, or a millionth”; and it is presumption for
28 any man to say to another, or for a church court to say to the members under
29 its care, “You must give such and such a proportion.” It is a matter between
30 God and the man’s own conscience. He must “give as God hath prospered
31 him,” and of the measure of his prosperity another man has no right to judge,
32 as he cannot know the condition of his affairs, nor how much has already
33 been given, or is habitually given, under the solemn injunction that “the left
34 hand shall not know what the right hand doeth.” (Reprinted as “Address on
35 Systematic Beneficence,” in Peck’s *Miscellanies*, vol. 1, pp. 130-145)
36

37 Since some within the PCA concur with John Owen and with the 1854 General Assembly
38 that the tithe is an inextricable part of the ceremonial law, and that the requirement of a tithe
39 is “presumption,” the solution is not so simple as to grant “full constitutional authority” to
40 *BCO* 54-1. Indeed, one might respectfully regret that such a change to the historic
41 Presbyterian and Reformed tradition was made without substantive study and deliberation.
42 When the Constitution was presented by the committee to be adopted by the General
43 Assembly, it is doubtful that many even knew that such a change to the 1933 book had been
44 made at this point.
45

46 The solution, therefore, is to alter the Confession of Faith itself, making the reception of
47 collections an ordinary element of worship. While the authors of this overture have their

1 own opinions on the three matters to be included in the Explanatory Minute, we do not wish
2 our opinions to be adopted by the Church until and unless sufficient study produces
3 consensus on those matters. These three minutes explanatory, therefore, are recommended
4 as part of the overture itself, to assure those whose opinions differ from ours that the
5 amendment to the *Confession of Faith* is *not* to be construed as settling any of these three
6 matters. Therefore, those Sessions persuaded that “tithes” is an appropriate term to use for
7 collections in New Testament churches are free to do so by the language of this overture.
8 Similarly, those who believe that the diaconal relief of the poor outside of the church is an
9 appropriate part of the “work of the church” are free to practice in accordance with such
10 belief by the language of this overture. And similarly, those who believe that the collection
11 should be taken before or after the formal beginning of worship itself are free to so practice,
12 by the language of this overture.
13

14 Biblical Considerations 15

16 The vast majority of our churches already take a collection as a regular part of worship, and
17 we therefore assume that they are convinced, biblically, that this is a lawful practice. We
18 concur with their judgment, and cite two texts as sufficient to prove that such a practice is
19 lawful.
20

21 First, we cite 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, which is also cited in the paper adopted by the 1854
22 General Assembly:
23

24 Now concerning the collection for the saints (Περὶ δὲ τῆς λογεΐας τῆς εἰς τοὺς
25 ἁγίους): as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the
26 first day of every week (Greek: “On the first day of the week”), each of you
27 is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will
28 be no collecting (λογεῖται γίνωνται) when I come.
29

30 Note first of all the reference to “the first day of the week,” an expression that only appears
31 in one of two contexts in the New Testament. It appears in the Gospel accounts of the
32 resurrection (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1), and it appears in accounts of the
33 subsequent gatherings of the saints for what we call “worship” (Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2).
34 Thus the reference to doing this “on the first day of the week” almost surely is a reference to
35 the gatherings of the saints on that day. And note secondly that this instruction is consistent
36 with Paul’s instructions to the Galatian churches also, suggesting that the practice was not
37 merely local.
38

39 Second, we cite Acts 2:42-44:
40

41 And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship (καὶ τῇ
42 κοινωνίᾳ), to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon
43 every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the
44 apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common
45 (καὶ εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινὰ).

1 We note several things about this text. First, these were not things the church merely
2 happened to do on a particular occasion under the apostles' oversight; these were things they
3 "*devoted* (προσκαρτεροῦντες) themselves to." This is the same verb that appears again in
4 Acts 6:4, when the apostles deliver responsibility for distributing the church's resources to
5 the deacons, because "we will *devote* (προσκαρτερήσομεν) ourselves to prayer and to the
6 ministry of the word." Thus the term itself suggests a distinction between the negotiable and
7 the non-negotiable, and perhaps between the regular and the occasional. Second, we note
8 that the English text obscures one important reality, by translating κοινωμία here as
9 "fellowship." Calvin and others take this to be a reference to the collection, both because its
10 root appears again in verse 44, where it clearly refers to having all things "in common"
11 (κοινῶ), and because the root of this term manifestly had this meaning elsewhere:

12
13 Rom. 12:13, "*contributing* (κοινωνοῦντες) to the needs of the saints,"
14 Rom. 15:26-27 For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some
15 *contribution* (τὴν φιλοξενίαν) for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.
16 They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the
17 Gentiles have come to *share* (ἐκοινώνησαν) in their spiritual blessings, they
18 ought also to be of service to them in material blessings
19 2 Cor. 8:4 begging us earnestly for the favor of *taking part in* (κοινωνίαν) the
20 relief of the saints
21 2 Cor. 9:13 ... and the generosity of your *contribution* (τῆς κοινωνίας) for
22 them and for all others
23 Phil. 4:15 And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the
24 gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church *entered into partnership*
25 (ἐκοινώνησεν) with me in giving and receiving, except you only.
26 Heb. 13:16 Do not neglect to do good and to *share* (κοινωνίας) what you
27 have...

28
29 Referring to Acts 2:42, then, Calvin concluded "No assembly of the Church should be held
30 without the word being preached, prayers being offered, the Lord's supper administered, and
31 *alms given*" (ICR IV. xvii.44, emphasis ours).

32
33 This overture would correct a deficiency in the Westminster standards that was due to the
34 historical circumstances in which they were created, in which the magistrate taxed his
35 citizens, and used part of that taxation to maintain and establish the Christian church. The
36 American churches later discovered the Christian duty and joy of contributing to the work of
37 the church and the relief of the poor, and enshrined this in their constitutional standards,
38 which, by this overture, we would do also.

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40 *Adopted by the Presbytery of the Ascension at its stated meeting, January 26, 2013*
41 *Attested by /s/ RE Frederick R. Neikirk, stated clerk*