

System Subscription

- I. Introduction
 - a. What's in a name, a rose by any other name is still a rose?
 - i. Often SS is associated with liberalism
 - ii. It has been labeled as "loose subscription"
 - iii. Yet system subscription has not lead to liberalism—liberalism is ultimately caused by unbelief
 - iv. What we'll see is that Old School confession subscription is system subscription
 - b. We will explore this thesis by the following
 - i. Briefly surveying the history of CS subscription
 1. Strict / full
 2. System
 3. Substance / good faith
 - ii. Theory and practice
 - iii. Then explain the use of the *animus imponentis* (the intention of the one imposing) as a key element of CS that is often left out of CS discussions
- II. Brief history of CS
 - a. Historically the Reformed church has had two approaches to CS
 - i. *Quia* (because) a confession is biblical
 1. Early English Reformed under Edward VI (1553) and under Elizabeth (1566) in subscribing to the then 42 Articles and the Second Helvetic Confession
 2. Scottish General Assembly (1647) required all ministers to subscribe to the Westminster Standards without qualification
 - ii. *Quatenus* (insofar as) a confession is biblical
 1. 1720 Irish Presbyterians required ministers to hold to the "substance of doctrine" in subscribing to the WS
 2. Nederlands Hervormde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) allowed *quatenus* subscription which led to a denominational split
 - b. Given these two approaches it seems as if it's an "all or nothing proposition" but it was Old School Presbyterianism that offered a middle ground
 - i. Samuel Miller (1833) asked the following question

“How is this public subscription, or assent to the Confession of faith to be understood?” Is it to be considered as precluding all variety of opinion whatever, as to the mode of explaining the doctrines of the Confession? Is it the design of this subscription to secure entire and perfect uniformity in the manner of construing every minute article, as to censure and exclude every possible diversity of exposition on any point? To *expect* such perfect uniformity, among two thousand ministers of the gospel, is a chimera. It never was or can be realized. And to

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attempt to *enforce* such a principle, would be worse than useless” (as cited in Clark, 171).

- ii. In other words, virtually all American Presbyterians have acknowledged that candidates will take *some* exception to the Standards
- iii. It was Charles Hodge who argued for a mediating position between full subscription (*quia*) and *quatenus* subscription.

“[The Confession may contain many propositions by way of argument or inference, or which lie entirely outside the system, and which may be omitted, and yet leave the system in its integrity” (Hodge, *Polity*, 326).

“The objection that it is an open question, what doctrines belong to the system and what do not, and therefore if the obligation be limited to the adoption of the system, it cannot be known what doctrines are received and what are rejected, is entirely unfounded. If the question, ‘What is the system of doctrine taught by the Reformed Church?’ be submitted to a hundred Romanists, to a hundred Lutherans, to a hundred members of the Church of England, or to a hundred skeptics, if intelligent and candid they would all give precisely the same answer. There is not the slightest doubt or dispute among disinterested scholars as to what doctrines do, and what do not belong to the faith of the Reformed” (Hodge, *Polity*, 333).

“The principle that the adoption of the Confession of Faith implies the adoption of all the propositions therein contained, is not only contrary to the plain, historical meaning of the words which the candidate is required to use, and to the mind of the Church in imposing a profession of faith, but the principle is impracticable. It cannot be carried out without working the certain and immediate ruin of the Church” (Hodge, *Polity*, 330).

III. Theory and practice

- a. What all too many do in the debates over CS is read what various proponents have to say on CS and ignore what they actually do in practice
- b. Hodge on imputation

“Our Confession teaches the doctrine of original sin. That doctrine is essential to the Reformed or Calvinistic system. Any man who denies that doctrine, thereby rejects the system taught in our Confession, and cannot with a good conscience say that he adopts it. Original sin, however, is one thing; the way in which it is accounted for is another Realists admit the doctrine, but unsatisfied with the principle of representative responsibility, assume that humanity as a generic life, acted and sinned in Adam, and, therefore, that his sin

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is the act, with its demerit and consequences, of every man in whom that generic life is individualized. Others, accepting neither of these solutions, assert that the fact of original sin (i.e., the sinfulness and condemnation of man at birth) is to be accounted for in the general law of propagation. Like begets like. Adam became sinful, and hence all his posterity are born in a state of sin, or with a sinful nature. Although these views are not equally Scriptural, or equally in harmony with our Confession, nevertheless they leave the doctrine intact, and do not work a rejection of the system of which it is an essential part” (*Polity*, 336-37).

- i. Hodge’s point is that a person can reject immediate imputation and instead only to mediate imputation (WCF 6.3).
- ii. A candidate takes issue with a proposition and rejects it but the integrity of the system remains intact
- iii. Hodge makes this very point:

“There are many propositions contained in the Westminster Confession which do not belong to the integrity of the Augustinian, or Reformed System. A man may be a true Augustinian or Calvinist, and not believe that the Pope is the Antichrist predicted by St. Paul; or that the 18th chapter of Leviticus is still binding” (*Polity*, 336).
- c. Hodge, Warfield, Thornwell on creation
 - i. Hodge and Warfield were known as proponents of theistic evolution
 1. They distinguished between the initial supernatural act of creation and the subsequent evolutionary development of the creation
 2. The former was an act of creation, the latter an act of providence
 - ii. Thornwell is one who in our own day is painted as an adherent to strict subscription, however historical evidence shows that his theory and practice were very similar to that of Hodge and Warfield
 1. Thornwell believed that all ecclesiastical activities, whether inside or outside the church, were under the authority of the church
 2. Thornwell was the editor of both the *Southern Quarterly Review* and the *Southern Presbyterian Review*
 3. As editor Thornwell believed that he “would be worthy of censure, should they allow opinions to be expressed subversive of any doctrine of the Gospel” (Chapell, “Perspective on the PCA’s Subscription Standards,” 112, n. 93).
 4. Under Thornwell’s oversight, a number of articles were published that advocated long geologic periods (i.e., the Gap Theory)

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“Indeed, we know of no rational way of accounting for the representation on the twenty-four hour hypothesis; but suppose the days to be indefinite periods, and then the explanation is easy and natural” (“The Six Days of Creation, *SQR* 1/1 [1856], 35).

“In the minds of *all competently informed persons* at the present day, after a long struggle for existence, the literal belief in the Judaical cosmogony, it may now be said, has died a natural death” (Ibid, 32-33).

“These days, then, were long periods; how long, we know not, whether ten years, or ten thousand, or ten million; some of them may have been longer, some shorter, for there is nothing in the record to confine them to the same precise duration. They are called days not because of their particular length, for that, as we have before remarked, is an accidental quality; but on account of their cyclical or periodical nature, which is an essential quality inhering in the very idea of a day” (Ibid., 44).

5. In case we might think that Thornwell was unaware of what was published in the journal under his watch, consider the following:

“I have a drawer full of essays, which the kindness of friends has sent to me, but which no blindness of friendship can induce me to accept. The necessity of giving pain to others, and to persons whom I highly esteem, is itself a great pain to me” (Thornwell, *Letters*, 398-99).

6. Note, Banner of Truth edition has “sanitized” Thornwell’s letters
 - a. In one letter Thornwell references an article on the Nebular Hypothesis, but Banner of Truth has the paragraph deleted

- d. John Murray’s well-known list of exceptions
 - i. The Shorter Catechism

“The Shorter Catechism is the finest document produced by the Westminster Assembly, and it is the most perfect document of its kind in the history of the church. Its definition of effectual calling, however, is distinctly defective, and not in accord with scriptural teaching. It represents calling as specifically and by way of eminence the work of the Holy Spirit. Scripture represents calling as specifically the action of God the Father. The Catechism defines calling very largely in terms of

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subjective response, whereas the emphasis in Scripture falls upon the divine *action*” (Murray, “The Theology of the WCF,” 258).

ii. Covenant of works

“The term ‘covenant of works’ to designate the Adamic administration (7.2) is not an accurate designation. If the term ‘covenant’ is used, the designation in the Shorter Catechism, ‘covenant of life’, is preferable” (Murray, 262).

iii. Testament

“It is said that the ‘covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a testament.’ The term ‘frequently’ reflects the position taken by the divines in interpreting the terms for covenant. But it is very questionable if more than Hebrews 9.16-17 could be cited in support of the proposition concerned, and so ‘frequently’ is scarcely warranted (262).

iv. Progressive Sanctification

“When, in reference to progressive sanctification, it is said that ‘the regenerate part doth overcome’ (13.3), this is not a satisfactory way of representing the relation of regeneration to the sanctifying process, nor is it in line with earlier statements in the chapter concerned” (262).

v. The church

“The Confession states its doctrine of the church in terms of this distinction [visible and invisible church] (25.1-3). While the distinction between visibility and invisibility will have to be maintained, yet the distinction is that of the aspect from which the church is to be viewed. For that reason as well as others, biblical study will scarcely warrant the definition: ‘The visible church . . . consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion’ (25.2). The *church* as visible may not be *defined* in terms of a mere profession” (262).

vi. Providence

“Oversight and inadequate statement. Providence is properly stated to be all-inclusive. But when we read that ‘by the same providence, He ordereth them [all things] to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently’ (5.2), there is surely a slip here. Not all things come to pass by operation of second causes. And this is clearly stated in the next section, where we read that God is free to work without means, at his pleasure” (262-63).

vii. Original sin

“An important omission occurs when, with reference to our first parents and their sin, the Confession says: ‘They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed.’ Something else is needed to ground the imputation of Adam’s sin to posterity, namely the representative headship of Adam. This is an oversight” (263).

viii. Murray’s understanding of these points

“It is with something of an apology that attention is drawn to these blemishes. But they serve to point up and confirm the observation made earlier that any amendment necessary does not affect the system of truth set forth in the Confession, and they remind us of the imperfection that must attach itself to human composition so that we may never place human documents or pronouncements on a par with the one supreme standard of faith” (263).

e. Summary of SS

i. Warfield

“Overstrictness demands and begets laxity in performance; while a truly liberal but conservative formula binds all essentially sound men together against laxity. In pleading for a liberal formula, therefore, we wish it distinctly understood that we do not please either for a lax formula, or much less for a lax administration of any formula—within which an essentially dishonesty lurks” (“Presbyterian Churches,” 648-49).

ii. SS can therefore be summarized in the following points

1. The Westminster Standards contain the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures
 - a. It is not a subset of the Standards
 - b. It is not boiling down the system to basic evangelical truths
 - c. It is the whole
2. Ministers and candidates may take exception to propositions within the system so long as the system remains intact
 - a. E.g., original sin must be affirmed and cannot be denied without destroying the system
 - b. A minister can take exception regarding mediate or immediate imputation and still affirm the system
3. Should recognize that there are some points of the system that might not impinge upon a person’s salvation (i.e., soteriology) but still collapse the system.

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- a. E.g., a person who does not affirm infant baptism can still be saved
- b. But to deny infant baptism compromises the integrity of the system vis-à-vis subscribing to it as a minister
- 4. System subscription is the middle ground between *quia* (because) or strict / full subscription and a minimalist *quatentus* (in so far as) view
- iii. There is a lingering question that usually arises, namely, How do presbyteries determine when an exception is unallowable?
- iv. Does not SS turn the Standards into theological Swiss cheese?

IV. The *Animus Imponentis*

- a. The issue of the AI is one of the more crucial issues in the whole matter of CS
- b. Hodge explains the AI in the following manner

“The two principles which, by the common consent of all honest men, determine the interpretation of oaths and professions of faith, are, first, the plain, historical meaning of the words; and secondly, the *animus imponentis*, that is, the intention of the party imposing the oath or requiring the profession” (Hodge, “Adoption of the Confession of Faith,” 319).

- i. In any section of the Standards, the church must take into account what the proposition has historically meant, whether
 - 1. Biblically
 - 2. In the early church
 - 3. In the immediate seventeenth-century context
- ii. However the candidate or minister must also take into account the intention and understanding of the body imposing the oath.
- c. For example, concerning the early debates over Premillennialism, the understanding of the OPC regarding the length of the days of creation
 - i. John Muether will address these issues at length
 - ii. But briefly,
 - 1. Q. 88 of the LC clearly precludes Premillennialism, but the OPC allows the view
 - 2. The OPC has never demanded that anyone holding to something other than six 24-hour view take exception to the Standards
 - 3. Theonomy stands in contradiction to WCF 19.4 yet the OPC allows this view
 - iii. Other smaller areas of common issues where the AI can be seen in practice
 - 1. The use of wine in the LS
 - 2. Exclusive psalmody
 - 3. The “frequent” use of the word *testament*

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- d. All presbyters and presbyteries have the obligation, therefore, to take into account both of these elements (original historical intent and the interpretation of the OPC).
 - i. To act in isolation from the rest of the denomination is akin to establishing a denomination within the denomination
 - ii. It is potentially disruptive to the peace and purity of the church
 - iii. If it is a matter where a presbyter or presbytery believes that the OPC's collective understanding (whether formally or informally) is of a serious nature, then there are proper channels
 1. Overtures
 2. Trials
 3. Peaceable withdrawal
 - iv. CS is inherently an ecclesiastical matter, not one of personal preference and goes hand in hand with our mutual submission to the brothers.

V. Conclusion

a. John Murray

“It seems to the present writer that to demand acceptance of every proposition in so extensive a series of documents would be incompatible with the avowal made in answer to the first question in the formula of subscription and comes dangerously close to the error of placing human documents on par with holy Scripture. Furthermore, the commitment of oneself to every proposition as the condition of exercising office in the Church is hardly consistent with the liberty of judgment on certain points of doctrine which has been characteristic of the Reformed Churches” (“Creed Subscription,” 79).

- b. System Subscription is not the Trojan horse of liberalism but rather the historic practice of Old School Presbyterians such as Hodge, Warfield, Thornwell, Machen, Murray, and historically the OPC.
- c. It is the truly liberal but conservative practice that avoids of the Scylla of demanding a dishonest subscription to every proposition and the Charybdis of denying so many propositions so as to leave nothing behind but a few meager doctrinal crumbs of the system of doctrine.
- d. Yes, a rose by any other name is still a rose, but sometimes we might be mistaken and might not be looking at a rose.
- e. In other words, to assume that system subscription is another word for liberalism fails to account for the plain facts of Presbyterian history.