

THE LEGACY OF OLD SCHOOL CONFESSION SUBSCRIPTION IN THE OPC

J. V. FESKO*

I. INTRODUCTION

Theological debate within the Reformed community is like the proverbial gnat on a hot summer day. No matter how many times one swats at the gnat, the winged creature refuses to surrender his pestiferous activity. This is certainly true concerning the debate surrounding confession subscription, or the manner in which an officer accepts the confessional standards of his denomination. The debate regarding confession subscription is as old as the church itself and has especially pestered the Presbyterian Church for its entire existence. The debate like the ebb and flow of the tide is currently at the high water mark in both the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) as evidenced by the recent actions of the General Assemblies of both denominations.¹ On either side of the debate there are advocates for two major positions: strict / full subscription, most notably from the pens of Morton Smith and George Knight, and loose / system subscription, most notably from the pen of William Barker.²

In the course of this long running debate both Smith and Knight have argued that loose / system subscription was advocated by the New School within the Presbyterian Church, which led to liberalism and the demise of the church. In contradistinction to the New School approach they both argue that they set forth the historic Old School position of full subscription, which is the only way that liberalism can be held at bay.³ This essay will challenge

* J. V. Fesko is pastor of Geneva Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 3340 Trickum Road, Marietta, GA 30066-4663.

¹ The PCA engaged in official debate on this subject and the OPC erected a study committee to determine which views on the days of creation were confessionally permissible (see *Minutes of the Sixty-Eighth General Assembly of the OPC* [Willow Grove, 2001] §§152–53, p. 34; cf. J. V. Fesko, “The Days of Creation and Confession Subscription in the OPC, *WTJ* 63 [2001] 235–49).

² Morton Smith, *The Subscription Debate: Studies in Presbyterian Polity* (Greenville: Greenville Presbyterian Seminary, n.d.); *idem*, “The Case for Full Subscription,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (ed. David W. Hall; 1997; Oak Ridge: Covenant Foundation, 2001) 185–206; George Knight, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,” in *Confessional Subscription* 119–48; *idem*, “A Response to Dr. William Barker’s Article ‘Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,’” *Presbyterion* 10 (1984); William S. Barker, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,” *Presbyterion* 10 (1984); *idem*, “System Subscription,” *WTJ* 63 (2001) 1–14.

³ Smith, *Subscription Debate* 10, 27–28; *idem*, “Full Subscription” 186; *idem*, *How is the Gold Become Dim* (Greenville: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1973) 39; *idem*, *Commentary on the PCA Book of Church Order* (Greenville: Greenville Presbyterian Press, 2000) 224; Knight, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession” 133–42.

this claim with an emphasis upon how the OPC has historically understood confession subscription. This essay will argue that the Smith / Knight (S/K) version of full subscription is not the historic Old School position on the subject. The essay will demonstrate that historic Old School confession subscription is different than the version that Smith and Knight set forth. The argument will first set forth the definitions and parameters of the S/K version of subscription. Second, we will compare the S/K version of subscription with Old School theoretical statements on the subject by an examination of a representative cross-section of well-known Old School theologians, and we will also examine the ecclesiastical practices of these theologians to see how theory works out in practice. Third, we will then examine the actions of representative OPC theologians to demonstrate how they have carried on the legacy of historic Old School Presbyterian confession subscription. Fourth, we will examine the implications of the contrast between the S/K and Old School positions. Last, we will conclude with some remarks not only about the debate but also about confession subscription in general.

II. SUBSCRIPTION ACCORDING TO SMITH AND KNIGHT

In order to distinguish the Smith and Knight version of subscription from historic Old School subscription we must first set forth the parameters of full subscription according to Smith and Knight. Smith defines full subscription in the following manner: "Strict or full subscription . . . holds that the ordinand is subscribing to nothing more or less than the entirety of the Confession and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures. In other words, the system of doctrine to which we subscribe is that which is contained in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms."⁴ In addition to this definition Smith is careful to delineate several factors concerning full subscription: (1) not all teachings in the standards are of equal importance but that the ordinand must confess all of the teachings of the Standards because they are all a part of the system of doctrine contained therein; (2) full subscription does not require the adoption of every word but the ordinand must adopt every teaching; and (3) he is careful to recognize that the Standards are subordinate to Scripture.⁵ Likewise, Knight observes that the ordinand must subscribe to every teaching of the Standards because the system of doctrine "is the whole body of truth contained in the Confession and Catechism" and it "must not be reduced to a number of 'fundamentals' no matter how basic, evangelical, and Scriptural."⁶

With these statements of definition and description in mind, it is helpful if we demarcate the specific parameters of full subscription according to Smith and Knight:

1. The system of doctrine is not a list of basic evangelical fundamentals but is the whole body of the Standards—every single teaching.

⁴ Smith, *Subscription Debate* 17.

⁵ *Ibid.* 5–6.

⁶ Knight, "Subscription" 142.

2. An ordinand may take exception to the wording of the Standards, note though that this is an exception regarding the form of expression and not the substance.
3. The underlying presupposition behind these parameters is that the “doctrines of the confession are to be regarded as ‘the very doctrines of the Word’” and this is why every teaching must be received.⁷

These parameters are best comprehended by the illustrations that both Smith and Knight provide. Smith writes:

The full subscriptionist believes that he is committed to every doctrinal position set forth in the Confession and Catechisms. He is thus committed to the view of marriage and divorce set forth in the Confession. If a member of his church desired to marry a Roman Catholic, which is specifically spoken against in the Confession, the full subscriptionist would not feel that he had the liberty to perform such a marriage, but rather must warn his parishioner against such a marriage.⁸

Likewise, Knight illustrates full subscription in the following manner:

If the candidate has indicated that he adopts the confessional standards and its doctrines, or if the candidate scruples or takes exception to the way in which a doctrine is stated but indicates that he agrees with the doctrine, and is in all other ways qualified, let us vote with joy and gladness, welcoming such an individual to take part in the ministry with us. If, however, the candidate scruples or takes exception to one or more of the doctrines of the system of doctrine of the confessional standards (and not merely to the way the doctrine is stated), let us realize our responsibility before God and to the church in terms of our own solemn ordination vow.⁹

Now, the impression that one is left with after reading these examples is that both Smith and Knight would allow for no substantive scruples and that any ordinand presenting such exceptions would be denied ordination. This, however, is not the case.

Smith allows for the possibility that an ordinand may take a substantive exception to the Standards. However, the ordinand does not have the liberty to teach contrary to the Standards. Smith writes that the

ordinand, who takes exception to a particular teaching of the Confession or Catechisms, may be ordained by the Presbytery, if it feels that the exception does not impinge upon the basic system of doctrine contained in the Standards. He is not thereby permitted to teach contrary to the Standards. He should teach the view of the Standards, so as not to disturb the Church by teaching contrary to her Standards. If one is not able thus to subject himself to the brethren, he should seek some other communion, where he has greater liberty.¹⁰

Knight appears to allow for substantive exceptions so long as they do not strike at the vitals of the system, though the decision as to whether or not

⁷ Ibid. 129.

⁸ Smith, *Subscription Debate* 7.

⁹ Knight, “Subscription” 145–46.

¹⁰ Smith, *Subscription Debate* 38; *idem*, *Commentary* 227.

the exception is permitted lies in the hands of the presbytery and, if necessary, the General Assembly. Knight argues that

no presbytery may allow the scrupling of any doctrine of the confessional standards but may only allow a scruple at a statement that is not vital to the system of doctrine . . . and where there are differences of opinion on the significance of the scruple the question is to be determined judicially by the proper ecclesiastical courts, that is, regional Synods and ultimately the General Assembly.¹¹

Now that the parameters of the S/K version of subscription have been set out, we can compare their conclusions with those of Old School theologians.

III. SUBSCRIPTION ACCORDING TO THE OLD SCHOOL

In the course of making their case Smith and Knight appeal to the tradition of Old School Presbyterianism. The Reformed luminaries to whom Smith and Knight appeal are theologians such as Charles Hodge (1797–1878), B. B. Warfield (1851–1921), and J. H. Thornwell (1812–62).¹² It is therefore important for us to establish both the areas of agreement and divergence between historic Old School subscription and the version set forth by Smith and Knight. The reason this is important is because Smith and Knight largely appeal to the statements of these Old School theologians to validate their own position. Their evidentiary findings, which in and of themselves are essentially correct, fail to take into consideration what these theologians actually did in practice. In other words, the key to understanding a theologian's theoretical statements is to see how theory translates into practice. For example, in studying Calvin one cannot ascertain what he believed by an examination of the *Institutes* alone. Rather, one must inspect the *Institutes*, his commentaries on relevant passages, his sermons, and even his personal correspondence to establish Calvin's position on a subject. Therefore, we will scrutinize what these Old School theologians have to say on subscription as well as their actions. This reconnaissance will demonstrate the areas of agreement but especially the divergence between the S/K version of subscription and the historic Old School position. The first area we must consider is the meaning of the "system of doctrine."

1. *Old School on the nature of the "system of doctrine."* It is important that we first examine what Old School theologians understand by the term "system of doctrine." Charles Hodge explains the different interpretations of this hotly contested phrase:

Every minister at his ordination is required to declare that he adopts the Westminster Confession and Catechism, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the sacred Scriptures. There are three ways in which these words have been, and still are, interpreted. First, some understand them to mean that every proposition contained in the Confession of Faith is included in the profession

¹¹ Knight, "Subscription" 145.

¹² Knight, "Response" 56.

made at ordination. Secondly, others say that they mean just what the words import. What is adopted is the ‘system of doctrine.’ The system of the Reformed Churches is a known and admitted scheme of doctrine, and that scheme, nothing more or less, we profess to adopt. The third view of the subject is, that by the system of doctrine contained in the Confession is meant the essential doctrines of Christianity and nothing more.¹³

Hodge’s explanation of the three major views of the term “system of doctrine” is important to distinguish Old School subscription from the S/K version of subscription. First, Hodge and Knight are in agreement when they argue that the “system of doctrine” does not refer to the “essential doctrines of Christianity and nothing more.”¹⁴ As previously quoted, Knight is correct to argue that “the system of doctrine must not be reduced to a number of ‘fundamentals’ no matter how basic, evangelical, and Scriptural.”¹⁵ Infant baptism, for example, is not essential to one’s salvation, but it is a hallmark of the Presbyterian system of doctrine. Infant baptism is one of the doctrines that distinguishes a Presbyterian from a Baptist. Therefore, Old School subscription and the S/K form of subscription are in agreement on this point. It is at this point, however, that the Old School and S/K part ways.

Recall that Smith and Knight argue that what is meant by the system of doctrine entails every single teaching of the Standards. Yes, an ordinand may take exception to the wording of a teaching but he may not reject the teaching outright. Knight argues that “the historic position has insisted that all the articles of the confessional standards are essential and necessary and that all the articles do contain and express the system of doctrine.”¹⁶ Recall Knight’s illustration of this position where he argues that if “the candidate scruples or takes exception to one or more of the doctrines of the system of doctrine or the confessional standards (and not merely to the way the doctrine is stated), let us realize our responsibility before God and to the church in terms of our own solemn ordination vow.”¹⁷ One may assume that Knight is arguing that the ordinand would either be restricted from advocating his exception or if necessary that he would be denied ordination. It is important that we recognize Knight’s use of terms in these two statements.

When Knight states that “the historic position has insisted that all the articles of the confessional standards are essential and necessary,” he has the chapter or article headings of the confession in mind, i.e. Of the Holy Scripture, Of God, and of the Holy Trinity, etc. Therefore the “system of doctrine” includes every single chapter heading in the confession. In addition to this Knight also argues that “all the articles do contain and express the system of doctrine.” In other words, not only does the system of doctrine consist of the chapter headings but it also consists of all of the doctrinal

¹³ Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (ed. William Durant; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878) 335–36.

¹⁴ Hodge, *Church Polity* 341–42.

¹⁵ Knight, “Subscription” 142.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 120.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 146.

propositions. So, for example, an ordinand may take an exception on the statement that God created “in the space of six days” (WCF 4.1) and say that he prefers to state the teaching in the following manner, “in the space of six ordinary or 24-hour days.” This is taking exception to the way, the form, in which a doctrine is stated. According to Knight, however, the ordinand may not take exception to the doctrine that God created “in the space of six days” and argue instead that creation occurred over six long ages. This would be an unacceptable exception according to Knight. Knight believes that his view represents the Old School position on the subject. Is this the case? The answer to this is, No.

Knight argues that Hodge’s views on subscription are the same views that he sets forth on the subject. He explains that Hodge argues that “officers were not bound to every proposition of the confessional standards, but that an officer must not reject any one of the constituent doctrines of the confessional standards.”¹⁸ Knight sees his own position in harmony with Hodge’s. Knight argues that when Hodge says a minister is not bound to “every proposition” that this is harmonious with his position that a minister does not have to adopt every word of the Confession.¹⁹ The problem with this analysis is that Hodge is not arguing that a minister may only take semantic exceptions to the Confession. On the contrary, Hodge argues that

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 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.²⁰

Hodge’s analysis touches on an important distinction between his own position and the S/K position. Smith and Knight repeat the idea that an ordinand is not required to subscribe to every word of the Standards. Hodge’s position, however, allows for an ordinand to take exception, not merely to wording, but to doctrinal teachings of the Standards.

Hodge’s quote, for example, illustrates that an ordinand may reject the Confession’s teaching on mediate imputation, that original sin is transmitted through the propagation of the race: “The same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary gen-

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 134.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 126.

²⁰ Hodge, *Church Polity* 336–37.

eration” (WCF 6.3b). The ordinand may instead exclusively affirm immediate imputation, which is also taught by the Confession: “They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed” (WCF 6.3a). The doctrine of original sin is not harmed and remains intact even if the ordinand rejects the Confession’s teaching on mediate imputation.²¹ Moreover, Hodge’s quote bears out the fact that a minister can affirm the realistic theory of the transmission of original sin, a view that is “not equally scriptural, or equally in harmony with our Confession,” and still retain the integrity of the system of doctrine.

We can see Hodge’s principle at work when he writes that “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.”²² Once again, we see that Hodge was willing to allow ministers to disagree, not merely with the wording, but with the very teachings of the Confession. In this case, the minister could effectively strike the statement that the Pope “is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition” (WCF 25.6). This is also the case with what the Confession states on the degrees of consanguinity: “The man may not marry any of his wife’s kindred nearer in blood than he may of his own, nor the woman of her husband’s kindred nearer in blood than of her own” (WCF 24.4). Granted, these statements were later stricken from the PCA and OPC editions of the Confession, but the point still stands—Hodge permitted ministers to reject doctrinal propositions in the Confession and still be ministers in good standing in the church.²³ These examples illustrate the divergence between the S/K version of full subscription and the historic Old School expression of subscription. It is important, though, that we see that Hodge was not alone in his understanding of confession subscription. Let us therefore examine how Hodge and other Old School theologians expressed themselves on the subject and how their ideas were applied in the church setting.

2. *Old School Confession subscription in theory and practice.* We have established Hodge’s, an Old School theologian, position on what it means to subscribe to the system of doctrine. It will be helpful to illuminate the Old School understanding of subscription by showing how representative Old School theologians handled various doctrines in connection with the Standards to which they vowed to adhere. Our first example comes from B. B. Warfield. Warfield is known as one of the great stalwarts of Old School Presbyterianism. He is cited by Knight in a positive manner when he writes

²¹ This was an intense debate in the early and middle seventeenth century within the Reformed Church (see John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam’s Sin* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959] 42ff.).

²² Hodge, *Church Polity* 336.

²³ Cf. *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646; Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1995); hereafter abbreviated as WCF 1646; *The Westminster Confession of Faith with a parallel Modern English Study Version* (1993; Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, 1997); and, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (3d ed.; Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990).

that Warfield believed that “subscription to the phraseology of the Confession is not required. But at the same time he stresses that ‘each one [officer] may be able to recognize it [the Confession] as an expression of the system of truth which he believes,’ meaning that every doctrine of the Confession is a part of subscription. ‘None of them [the officers of the church] contradict it’ [the Confession]. This position Warfield desires the Church ‘to hold men strictly to.’”²⁴ Once again, one can see in Knight’s analysis that he believes that Warfield is advocating every doctrine though one may scruple over the phraseology of the Confession. As in the analysis of Hodge, it is important to determine what Warfield means by the term “proposition.”

In the article that Knight cites, Warfield writes that “the most we can expect, and the most we have right to ask is, that each one may be able to recognize it as an expression of the system of truth which he believes. To go beyond this and seek to make each of a large body of signers accept the Confession in all its propositions as the profession of his personal belief, cannot fail to result in serious evils.”²⁵ According to Knight, Warfield is arguing that a minister may take exception to the phraseology of the Confession but that he may not reject any of the doctrinal teachings. This, however, is not borne out by Warfield’s understanding of the term “proposition” as well as his own ecclesiastical practice. In Warfield’s analysis of the 1903 revisions to the Westminster Confession he quotes the “Declaratory Statement” which has reference to the third chapter in the Confession:

With reference to Chapter III of the Confession of Faith: that concerning those who are saved in Christ, the doctrine of God’s eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine of his love to all mankind, his gift of his Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and his readiness to bestow his saving grace on all who seek it. That concerning those who perish, the doctrine of God’s eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine that God desires not the death of any sinner, but has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and freely offered in the Gospel to all; that men are fully responsible for their treatment of God’s gracious offer; that his decree hinders no man from accepting that offer; and that no man is condemned except on the ground of his sin.²⁶

Now, it is important to note what Warfield identifies as a proposition in this paragraph. Warfield writes:

In the first interest the following propositions are enumerated: (1) that God loves all mankind; (2) that he has given his Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world; (3) that he is ready to bestow his saving grace on all who seek it. In the second interest, it is declared: (4) that God desires not the death of any sinner; (5) that he has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and freely offered in the Gospel to all; (6) that men are fully

²⁴ Knight, “Subscription” 136. Note, the supplied brackets belong to Knight.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 135; B. B. Warfield, “Presbyterian Churches and the Westminster Confession,” *Presbyterian Review* 10/40 (1889) 650.

²⁶ B. B. Warfield, “1903 Revision of the Confession of Faith,” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 2 (ed. John E. Meeter; 1973; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001) 375.

responsible for their treatment of God's gracious offer; (7) that his decree hinders no man from accepting that offer; (8) that no man is condemned except on the ground of his sin. Here are eight doctrinal propositions.²⁷

Notice that Warfield identifies a proposition as a doctrinal teaching, not merely as to how something is stated. Hence, this means, *pace* Knight, that Warfield does not merely allow exceptions regarding phraseology but instead allows that ministers can disagree with doctrinal propositions. This is the same position that was advocated by Hodge. Warfield's position can be further illuminated when one compares his statements on the matter to his ecclesiastical practice.

Warfield as it may, or may not, be known was an advocate of theistic evolution. In an essay on John Calvin's (1509–64) doctrine of creation Warfield writes:

It should be scarcely passed without remark that Calvin's doctrine of creation is, if we have understood it aright, for all except the souls of men, an evolutionary one. The "indigested mass," including the 'promise and potency' of all that was yet to be, was called into being by the simple *fiat* of God. But all that has come into being since—except the souls of men alone—has arisen as a modification of this original world-stuff by means of the interaction of its intrinsic forces. Not these forces apart from God, of course . . . but in the sense that all the modifications of the world-stuff have taken place under the directly upholding and governing hand of God, and find their account ultimately in His will. But they find their account proximately in 'second causes'; and this is not only evolutionism but pure evolutionism.²⁸

Now, setting aside Warfield's analysis of Calvin's doctrine of creation for the moment, as it is dubious, we must see the parameters of his theistic evolution.²⁹ Warfield still affirmed *creatio ex nihilo*, which is borne out by his statement that "all that was yet to be, was called into being by the simple *fiat* of God." Yet, he believed that once the "world-stuff" was created *ex nihilo* by God that secondary causes took over; these secondary causes are the evolutionary process. Warfield calls this "pure evolutionism" in contrast to unreconstructed Darwinian evolutionism.³⁰ Warfield believed that "evolution means modification, and creation means origination, and surely modification and origination are ultimate conceptions and mutually exclude one another."³¹ He saw this construction in line with the affirmation of classic Reformed theology.

²⁷ Warfield, "1903 Revision" 377.

²⁸ B. B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Creation," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 5 (ed. E. D. Warfield et al.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 304–5.

²⁹ Cf. John Murray, "Calvin's Doctrine of Creation," *WTJ* 17 (1954) 21–43.

³⁰ Cf. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (New York: Modern Library, 1998); *idem*, *The Voyage of the Beagle* (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

³¹ B. B. Warfield, "Review of James Orr, *God's Image in Man and Its Defacement in the Light of Modern Denials*," in *B. B. Warfield: Evolution, Science, and Scripture: Selected Writings* (ed. Mark A. Noll and David N. Livingstone; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 233; also *idem*, *PTR* 4 (1906) 455–58.

Warfield quotes Johannes Wollebius (1586–1629) of the University of Basel in support of this idea when he writes that “the old definition of creation as the making of something *paritm ex nihilo, partim ex materia naturaliter inhabili—ex materia inhabili supra naturae vires aliquid producere—* is certainly a sound one.”³² This is the concept of *mediate creation*, which Warfield saw as a middle ground between creation and Darwinian evolution; it could account for both the divine creation of the cosmos as well as the claims of science.³³ Warfield, therefore, could even allow for the evolutionary development of man’s body: “Let man have arisen through the divine guidance of the evolutionary process; there is, then, no creative act of God concerned in man’s production, but only a providential activity of God.”³⁴ Now, the question arises, how can Warfield advocate these views and still consider himself within the confines of the Westminster Standards?

While Warfield does not directly address the point, we can see from Hodge’s understanding of the “system of doctrine,” and Warfield’s own similar understanding, that there is no problem advocating these views. How so? Keep in mind that Hodge and Warfield believed that so long as a theologian’s views did not impinge upon the essentials of the “system of doctrine,” he was not held suspect. Regarding the essentials of the doctrine of creation, for example, Hodge writes the following:

The doctrine of creation, viz., that the universe and all that it contains is not eternal, is not a necessary product of the life of God, is not an emanation from the divine substance, but owes its existence as to substance and form solely to his will: and in reference to man, that he was created in the image of God, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, and not *in puris naturalibus*, without any moral character.³⁵

Now, some may argue that, yes, Warfield’s affirmations do contradict the essentials that Hodge sets forth because Warfield’s teaching undermines the scriptural truth that man was created in God’s image. If Warfield allows for evolutionary development of the body of man, then how can man be made in God’s image? Warfield would argue that God’s image is not based in man’s body, unless one is an anthropomorphite. For this reason Warfield can argue that “the biblicist is scarcely justified in insisting upon an exclusive supernaturalism in the production of man such as will deny the possibility of the incorporation of natural factors into the process.”³⁶ With the parameters of confession subscription set forth by Hodge and Warfield we see how they could in good conscience subscribe to the Standards and at the same time

³² Warfield, “Review of Orr,” in *Evolution* 233; see also Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium-Theologiae Christianiae*, in *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John W. Beardslee; New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) §5, 54ff.

³³ See B. B. Warfield, “Creation, Evolution, and Mediate Creation,” in *Evolution* 204; also *idem*, *The Bible Student* 4/1 (1901) 1–8.

³⁴ Warfield, “Review of Orr” 234.

³⁵ Hodge, *Church Polity* 338.

³⁶ B. B. Warfield, “The Manner and Time of Man’s Origin,” in *Evolution* 214; also *idem*, *The Bible Student* 8/5 (1903) 241–52.

hold to long geological periods and evolutionary views. Recall that Hodge held similar views to Warfield on the doctrine of creation. How could they harmonize their views on creation and still subscribe to the Standards? Hodge and Warfield believed that their views did not undermine the essentials of the system as they understood them.³⁷

Now, there are some advocates of the S/K version of subscription that will concede that Hodge and Warfield were Old School theologians but that they made a strategic and hermeneutical error in accommodating the claims of science popular in their day with the Bible. Moreover, they argue that this was a departure from confessional orthodoxy. They also claim that leading Old School theologians in the Southern Presbyterian Church, such as Thornwell, R. L. Dabney (1820–98), and J. L. Girardeau (1825–98), were vigilant against the claims of science and maintained confessional orthodoxy.³⁸ Yet, is this claim accurate? While there is little question regarding the positions of Dabney and Girardeau, there is important information regarding the position of Thornwell on the matter.

3. *Thornwell's Old School views in practice.* It is typically argued that Thornwell was a staunch advocate of strict subscription and was therefore averse to the positions of Hodge and Warfield. Yet, one must take into account Thornwell's statements on confession subscription and his activity in the church. First, given Thornwell's debates with Hodge on the issue of church boards, it is important to remember that Thornwell saw all ecclesiastical activity, whether within or without the church, under the authority of the church.³⁹ For example, editions of the journals under Thornwell's editorship had statements which said that editors "would be worthy of censure, should they allow opinions to be expressed subversive of any doctrine of the Gospel."⁴⁰ Second, one must take into account his advocacy of what one would call strict subscription. Thornwell writes, for example, that "the Westminster Confession and Catechisms we cordially receive as the mind of the Spirit. We believe them to be faithful expositions of the Word of God. The great system which they teach never can be altered by those who love the Truth."⁴¹ We must then take these two points and hold them along side of Thornwell's editorial activity. Thornwell was the editor of both the *Southern*

³⁷ See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1889; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 1.570ff.

³⁸ See e.g. Morton Smith, "The History of the Creation Doctrine in the American Presbyterian Churches," and W. Duncan Rankin and Stephen R. Berry, "The Woodrow Evolutionary Controversy," in *Did God Create in Six Days?* (ed. Joseph A. Pipa and David W. Hall; Taylors: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1999) 1–40, 53–100.

³⁹ See J. H. Thornwell, *The Life and Letters of J. H. Thornwell* (ed. B. M. Palmer; 1875; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979) 225; *idem*, *The Collected Writings of J. H. Thornwell* (1875; 4 vols.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974) 4.152–53.

⁴⁰ See Bryan Chapell, "Perspective on the Presbyterian Church in America's Subscription Standards," *Presbyterion* 27/2 (2001) 112, n. 93.

⁴¹ J. H. Thornwell, "Reasons for Separate Organization," in *Writings* 4.442.

Quarterly Review and the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. Under his editorship there were multiple articles that were published that advocated vast periods of time rather than the traditional 6,000-year age that was typically assigned to the earth.⁴² The general outline of the position was that some theologians posited an immense period of time between the time that Genesis called “the beginning” and the concluding six days of creation, something akin to a “Gap Theory.”⁴³ In case some might try to argue that Thornwell had only incidental knowledge of these articles or that he only tolerated them, one must examine his personal correspondence to see that this is not the case.

As stated before, Thornwell was the editor of the *Southern Quarterly Review*. One can read Thornwell’s personal correspondence regarding the editorship of this periodical in his collected letters edited by B. M. Palmer (1818–1902).⁴⁴ What is of particular interest is a letter that Thornwell wrote to G. F. Holmes (1820–97), dated 17 June 1856.⁴⁵ In the *Banner of Truth* edition, Palmer includes this letter but deletes several key paragraphs.⁴⁶ Why is this significant? First, in the deleted paragraphs Thornwell discusses several articles that appear in the 1856 edition of the *Southern Quarterly Review*. In particular, one article argues for vast periods of time: “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.”⁴⁷ Another article argues for the legitimacy of the Nebular Hypothesis.⁴⁸ The Nebular Hypothesis was a concept that had its origin in the thought of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Simon

⁴² See e.g. “The Harmony of Revelation, and Natural Science; with Especial Reference to Geology,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 5/1 (1851–52) 93–111; “Foot-Prints of the Creator, or the Asterolepsis of Stromness,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 5/1 (1851–52) 111–44; and “Evidence of the Degradation of Animals,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 5/3 (1851–52) 417–43.

⁴³ E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture 1795–1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978) 99; Theodore Dwight Bozeman, “Science, Nature and Society: A New Approach to James Henley Thornwell,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 50 (1972) 313–14.

⁴⁴ Thornwell, *Letters* 397–414.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 398–99.

⁴⁶ As to why Palmer deletes these paragraphs may never be known. It is possible that he saw them as problematic given the brewing controversy surrounding the rise of the Woodrow case (see Rankin, “The Woodrow Evolutionary Controversy,” in *Create in Six Days* 53–100). Palmer may have wanted to distance Thornwell from Woodrow’s position.

⁴⁷ “The Six Days of Creation,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 1/1 (1856) 35. There are several bold statements in this article such as: “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” (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” (44).

⁴⁸ Thornwell to George Frederick Holmes, 17 June 1856, in *Letterbook 1850–75*, at Duke University Library, Special Collections Archives; “The Nebular Hypothesis,” *The Southern Quarterly Review* 1/1 (1856) 95–117.

Pierre Laplace (1749–1827).⁴⁹ The theory, generally speaking, argues that nebulas develop into comets, comets develop into suns, and that these suns turn into inhabitable worlds like the Earth.

This is evolutionary theory, though not of the Darwinian type, because Thornwell was careful to guard the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, applied to the development of the cosmos, which would obviously take vast periods of time to unfold. One should also note that Thornwell was not short of submissions and therefore needed to scrape up whatever essays he could find. Thornwell laments to Holmes: “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.”⁵⁰ Thornwell, then, specifically chose these two essays and others like them over many other submissions. What is also of interest is that Thornwell extends an invitation to Holmes to teach at South Carolina College where he served as president, if one of the faculty members, a “D. Dickens,” resigns. What is interesting, though, is that Holmes is most likely the author of the “Six Days of Creation” article that appeared in the 1856 edition of the *Southern Quarterly Review*.⁵¹ How is it possible that Thornwell could publish views advocating vast periods of time and offer teaching positions to men who advocated these views? Does this not compromise his confessional orthodoxy? The answer to this is, No.

It is important to note that Thornwell, like Hodge and Warfield, believed that he could harmonize the claims of science and Scripture. For example, he writes that “it is only when the geologist proceeds to the causes of his facts, and invest hypotheses to explain them, that any inconsistency is evidently not betwixt geology and religion, but geologists and Moses.”⁵² Therefore, he could affirm:

Let the earth be explored, let its physical history be traced, and a mighty voice will come to us from the tombs of its perished races testifying in a thousand instances to the miraculous hand of God. Geology and the Bible must kiss and embrace each other, and this youngest daughter of Science will be found, like the Eastern Magi, bringing her votive offerings to the cradle of the Prince of Peace.⁵³

Thornwell saw the need, like Hodge and Warfield, to harmonize the claims of science with the teaching of Scripture. Moreover, he did not see this wedding of science and theology as a compromise of his confessional subscription. He, like Hodge and Warfield, believed that he could hold these views and at the

⁴⁹ See Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Cosmogony: As in His Essay on the Retardation of the Rotation of the Earth and his Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (trans. W. Hastie; 1900; New York: Johnson Reprint, 1970); and Pierre Simon Laplace, *Exposition du Système du Monde* (1796; Paris: Fayard, 1984).

⁵⁰ Thornwell, *Letters* 398–99.

⁵¹ James Oscar Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986) 137, n. 38.

⁵² Thornwell, “An External Standard Vindicated,” in *Writings* 3.71.

⁵³ Thornwell, “Miracles,” in *Writings* 3.275–76.

same time strictly subscribe to the Standards. Thornwell, like his northern Old School counterparts, could write: "The great system which they teach never can be altered by those who love the Truth; but there are incidental statements not affecting the plan of salvation and the doctrines of grace, about which our children may not be as well satisfied as ourselves."⁵⁴ This is important evidence when making analysis of the Old School understanding of confession subscription.

4. *Summary.* We have seen how advocates of Northern and Southern Old School Presbyterianism, Hodge, Warfield, and Thornwell, understood confession subscription. The evidence has shown us that the S/K version of confession subscription does not accord with the Old School affirmations on subscription and how that understanding works itself out in the context of the church. The evidence demonstrates that while the Old School view demands that the subscriber adopt every article and doctrine of the Standards, they do not believe the subscriber must adopt every proposition. This is not merely the category of semantic exception but propositional, or substantive, exception. Warfield describes this understanding in the following manner:

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 plead either for a lax formula, or much less for a lax administration of any formula—within which an essential dishonesty lurks.⁵⁵

Who determines when a substantive propositional exception is unacceptable? According to Hodge and Warfield it is the Church.⁵⁶ This, then, is Old School subscription: it is conservative, in that it requires the adoption of every article and doctrine, yet it is liberal in that it does not require the adoption of every proposition. Moreover, *pace* Smith, these men advocated their teachings even though one might be able to make a case that they contradict the *ipsissima verba* of the Confession.⁵⁷ Now, it is this truly liberal but conservative formula that embodies Old School Presbyterianism that has been carried forward in the OPC.

IV. OLD SCHOOL SUBSCRIPTION AND THE OPC

It is commonly known that J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) started Westminster Theological Seminary with the idea that he was carrying forward Old School Presbyterianism.⁵⁸ Machen not only brought Old School Presbyterianism into Westminster, but he also brought it into the OPC. The fact

⁵⁴ Thornwell, "Reasons for Separate Organization," in *Writings* 3.442.

⁵⁵ Warfield, "Presbyterian Churches" 648–49.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 650; Hodge, *Church Polity* 319.

⁵⁷ Smith, for example, might argue that Hodge and Warfield's views on creation, as well as Thornwell's propagation of similar views, were contrary to the Standards (see Smith, *How is the Gold Become Dim* 58ff.).

⁵⁸ D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 128.

that the OPC has understood that it has historically been an Old School denomination can be substantiated not only by the statements of its patriarch theologians on subscription but also by its actions as a denomination. One must note that the constitution of the OPC formally defines who and what the OPC is, but it is the actions of the OPC that materially define who and what she is. Let us therefore examine one of the first major debates on confession subscription in the nascent years of the OPC.

1. *The debate over premillennialism.* Perhaps many know that the issue of eschatology, namely premillennialism, was an issue under consideration in the first two years of the OPC's existence. What many might not know is that it was a debate that was something of a dogfight. Why was this the case? To answer this question requires us first to survey the teaching of the Standards and then see why it was a hotly debated subject. First, the Larger Catechism teaches the following regarding the return of Christ:

What are we to believe concerning the resurrection? A. We are to believe, that at the last day there shall be a general resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust: when they that are then found alive shall in a moment be changed; and the self-same bodies of the dead which were laid in the grave, being then again united to their souls for ever, shall be raised up by the power of Christ. The bodies of the just, by the Spirit of Christ, and by virtue of his resurrection as their head, shall be raised in power, spiritual, incorruptible, and made like to his glorious body; and the bodies of the wicked shall be raised up in dishonor by him, as an offended judge (q. 87).

What shall immediately follow after the resurrection? A. Immediately after the resurrection shall follow the general and final judgment of angels and men; the day and hour whereof no man knoweth, that all may watch and pray, and be ever ready for the coming of the Lord (q. 88).

It is important to note that the Catechism states that there is only one "general resurrection of the dead" on "the last day" as well as the fact that "immediately after the resurrection shall follow the general and final judgment of angels and men." There is then, in these statements no room for a thousand-year reign in between the resurrection and the final judgment as premillennialists hold.⁵⁹ Historically speaking, this fact has not gone unnoticed. Dabney, for example, writes that the divines were

well aware of the movement of early Millennialians, and the persistence of their romantic and exciting speculations among several sects. Our divines find in the Scriptures the clearest assertions of Christ's second advent, and so they teach it most positively. They find Paul describing with equal clearness one resurrection of the saved and lost just before this glorious second advent and general judgment. So they refuse to sanction a pre-millennial advent.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See e.g. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 1209–12.

⁶⁰ R. L. Dabney, "The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession: Its Fundamental and Regulative Ideas, and the Necessity and Value of Creeds," in *Memorial Volume of the Westminster Assembly 1647–1897* (ed. Francis R. Beattie et al.; Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1897) 101.

This evaluation runs through to Machen and the OPC. Machen likewise writes: "It is true, the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms teach not the Premillennial view but a view that is opposed to the Premillennial view. That is particularly plain in the Larger Catechism (q. 87 and 88)."⁶¹ Machen goes further than Dabney in saying that the teaching of the Standards is "opposed" to premillennialism, where as Dabney only says that the Standards "refuse to sanction." Now, it is at this point that Machen and the OPC's Old School distinctives emerge in connection with this debate.

Had Machen and the OPC employed the S/K version of subscription, they would have required that premillennialists take an exception to the Standards and not be allowed to teach this exception. Yet, this is not what Machen or the OPC did. Regarding confession subscription and premillennialism, Machen writes:

Subscription to the Westminster Standards in the Presbyterian Church of America is not to every word in those Standards, but only to the *system* of doctrine which the Standards contain. The real question, then, is whether a person who holds the Premillennial view can hold that system. Can a person who holds the Premillennial view be a true Calvinist; can he, in other words, hold truly to the Calvinistic or Reformed system of doctrine which is set forth in the Westminster Standards? We think that he can; and for that reason we think that Premillennialists as well as those who hold the opposing view may become ministers or elders or deacons in The Presbyterian Church of America. We think that a man who holds that the return of Christ and the final judgment take place not in one act, as the Westminster Standards contemplate them as doing, but in two acts with a thousand-year reign of Christ upon the earth in between, yet may honestly say that he holds the system of doctrine that the Standards contain.⁶²

Now, in case there is any confusion regarding Machen's phrase that subscribers need not receive "every word in those Standards," his position is not that of S/K but that of Hodge and Warfield. This is clear from the fact that Machen is allowing a position that is not merely a semantic disagreement but a substantive contradiction to the Standards.

Machen's statement is equivalent to Hodge and Warfield's statements regarding the fact that subscribers need not receive every proposition of the Standards. This is borne out when Machen makes a conscious connection with the historic Old School understanding of subscription:

It is no new thing to take this position regarding creed-subscription. It is the position which has long been taken by orthodox Calvinistic theologians. I think any fears which Premillennialists in The Presbyterian Church of America may have lest their view may suddenly be regarded by anyone in the Church as a heresy unfitting them for ordination are quite groundless.⁶³

Just like Hodge and Warfield, so long as the subscriber's exception did not strike at the system, all of the articles and doctrines, he could disagree and

⁶¹ J. Gresham Machen, "Premillennialism," *The Presbyterian Guardian* 3/2 (24 October 1936) 45.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

effectively strike certain propositions. Like his predecessors before him, this is the “liberal but truly conservative formula.” This also did not mean that Machen and the OPC declared an open season upon the Standards allowing any proposition to be excepted. Machen again writes:

Of course, that does not mean that a man may subscribe to our ordination pledge no matter how many errors he holds, provided only he is a Premillennialist. Undoubtedly there are many errors held by many Premillennialists, as also there are many errors held by many who are not Premillennialists, which ought to prevent a man from being received into the ministry or eldership of The Presbyterian Church of America. But the point is that such persons are to be excluded from the ministry or eldership not because they are Premillennialists, but for other reasons.⁶⁴

We see, then, that Machen recognized that there are propositions, which if excepted to, strike at the system of doctrine and preclude a man from ordination. Again, like Hodge and Warfield, the Church must decide when and if an exception strikes at the system of doctrine. This evidence clearly places Machen in the line of Hodge, Warfield, and Old School Presbyterianism. What, though, of the OPC as a denomination? Machen was an individual; what did the OPC decide on this matter?

It is important to see how this issue played out at the denominational level to demonstrate that the OPC has historically been an Old School denomination. The debate over premillennialism manifested itself in both the first and second General Assemblies of the OPC. Prior to the second General Assembly the Presbytery of California overtured the Assembly on the matter of premillennialism. They write:

Despite the fact that our Presbytery is nearly unanimously premillennialian in its personnel, it would be farthest from our desire that the Presbyterian Church of America close her doors against all who disbelieve in the premillennial return of our Lord. To do so we are convinced would displease Christ. We recognize that brethren who are post-millennialists or a-millennialists may, and many of them do, equally love our Lord's appearing. . . . Therefore, we earnestly and prayerfully appeal to you (and to all other Presbyteries, if God wills it, to join us in our plea) that definite, emphatic, and unambiguous eschatological liberty be written into the constitution of our beloved church.⁶⁵

It is evident from this overture that this was an issue of great concern for the elders of the Presbytery of California. In addition to this overture a member of the Presbytery of California, Rev. Milo Jamison (1899–1985), proposed that a declaratory statement be appended to the Confession to the effect that the “Presbyterian Church of America does not officially interpret any part of the Westminster Confession of Faith or Catechisms as being opposed to the premillennial view.”⁶⁶ The assembly, however, was not in agreement

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ As cited in J. Gresham Machen, “The Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America,” *3/3 Presbyterian Guardian* (14 November 1936) 55.

⁶⁶ As cited in T. R. Birch, “The Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America,” *3/4 Presbyterian Guardian* (28 November 1936) 82.

that either eschatological liberty be written into the Standards or that a declaratory statement be appended to the Confession. In fact, J. Oliver Buswell (1895–1977), a premillennialist, argued that he could accept the Standards as they were and moved that they adopt the Standards as they existed in the Presbyterian Church in the USA in 1934.⁶⁷ T. R. Birch, the editor of the *Presbyterian Guardian*, recounts what happened after Buswell's motion:

Dr. Machen . . . reiterated the well-established fact that no one has ever felt that a premillennialist cannot subscribe to our doctrinal standards. He deplored any line-up of individuals or churches on the millennial question. . . . As a direct response to this speech the substitute amendment of Dr. Buswell was laid on the table, and the amendment of Mr. Jamison was defeated.

The Standards were adopted; the vote was 57 to 20.⁶⁸ The 20 negative votes were most likely those elders who were from the Presbytery of California and those sympathetic to their overture. In fact, Jamison entered in a protest in regard to the Assembly's refusal to incorporate eschatological liberty into the Standards.⁶⁹

What these events demonstrate is that the OPC took an Old School approach to Confession subscription—allowing officers to take exceptions to propositions in the Standards. They, therefore, saw no need to amend the Standards or to include a declaratory statement ensuring eschatological liberty. Along these lines Machen writes:

We think that any attempt to deal with these matters in the Constitution of the Church would be nothing short of folly. The doctrinal standards of the Church should be simply the historic Westminster Standards. This is not a creed-making age, and we certainly have not the ability to formulate doctrine. There is hardly the remotest chance that we can agree upon anything—any statement of our attitude toward our Lord's return or anything else—except what is hallowed for us by its inclusion in our grand historic Confession of Faith and Catechisms. For the reasonable interpretation of these Standards, and in particular for the reasonable interpretation of the meaning of the ordination pledge, so far as the time of our Lord's return is concerned, we must have confidence in our brethren. Unless we have that mutual confidence, it would have been better that we should not have attempted to form a church at all.⁷⁰

Machen's opinion was certainly reflected in the actions of the Assembly. Like their Old School predecessors before them, they recognized that men could hold exceptions to the Standards, propagate them, and still be considered as officers in good standing.⁷¹ This is not at all a picture that reflects the views

⁶⁷ Ibid. 83.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid. In fact, Jamison later withdrew from the OPC and joined the Bible Presbyterian Church, presumably over this issue (see James T. Dennison, Jr., *A Ministerial and Congregational Register of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church 1936–2001* [Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2001] 74–75).

⁷⁰ Machen, "General Assembly" 43.

⁷¹ Cf. J. Oliver Buswell, "A Premillennialist's View," *3/2 Presbyterian Guardian* (24 October 1936) 46–47.

of Smith and Knight. The handling of the millennial debate, however, is not the only example of Old School subscription in the OPC. We can turn to another luminary of the Reformed Faith and patriarch of the OPC to demonstrate its Old School heritage, namely John Murray.

2. *Murray's Old School views on subscription.* When it comes to John Murray (1898–1975), both Smith and Knight cite him as an advocate of their position. In fact, Murray's essay on confession subscription has been bound together with Smith's writings on the subject.⁷² What, then, does Murray affirm about subscription and how does his theory work out in practice? First, in Murray's essay he surveys the history of the subject throughout American Presbyterianism. Towards the end of the essay Murray approvingly quotes Hodge: "If the Church intended that the candidate should adopt every proposition contained in the Confession of Faith, why did she not say so? It was easy to express that idea. The words actually do not, in their plain established meaning express it."⁷³ Murray then concludes:

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.⁷⁴

This statement, then, places Murray in agreement with his Old School predecessors as well as with the overall trajectory of the OPC on subscription. Murray does not merely allow semantic exceptions, but exceptions over entire propositions within the Standards. This fact is something that is demonstrable from Murray's own theological views.

Murray argues that subscribers to the Standards need not accept every proposition of the Standards. Along these lines, Murray could write that "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." He could also write that "its definition of effectual calling, however, is distinctly defective, and not in accord with Scriptural teaching."⁷⁵ Here Murray does not simply take issue with the wording of the Catechism; he actually outright rejects its teaching. This is not the only exception Murray takes to the Standards. As most know, Murray did not accept the Standards' teaching regarding the Covenant of Works. Murray writes: "The term

⁷² See Smith, *Subscription Debate* 66–81.

⁷³ Hodge, *Church Polity* 327 as cited in John Murray, "Creed Subscription in the Presbyterian Church in the USA," in Smith, *Subscription Debate* 79.

⁷⁴ Murray, "Creed Subscription" 79.

⁷⁵ John Murray, "The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith," in *Scripture and Confession: A Book About Confessions Old and New* (ed. John H. Skilton; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973) 143.

‘covenant of works’ to designate the Adamic Administration (Chapter 7, Section 2) is not an accurate designation. If the term ‘covenant’ is used, the designation in the Shorter Catechism ‘covenant of life’ is preferable.”⁷⁶ Now, in case some might try to argue that Murray is simply taking semantic exception to the teaching of the Standards, it is important that we understand the substance of his exception.

Murray did not believe that he held to the common Reformed position that was historically advocated by Reformed theologians or by the Westminster Standards. In fact, he saw himself as a self-avowed revisionist on the subject of covenant theology. Murray writes that

theology must always be undergoing reformation. The human understanding is imperfect. However architectonic may be the systematic constructions of any one generation or group of generations, there always remains the need for correction and reconstruction so that the structure may be brought into closer approximation to the Scripture and the reproduction be a more faithful transcript or reflection of the heavenly exemplar. It appears to me that the covenant theology, notwithstanding the finesse of analysis with which it was worked out and the grandeur of its articulated systematization, needs recasting. We would not presume to claim that we shall be so successful in this task that the reconstruction will displace and supersede the work of the classic covenant theologians. But with their help we may be able to contribute a little towards a more Biblically articulated and formulation construction of the covenant concept and of its application to our faith, love, and hope.⁷⁷

It is important that we note Murray’s terms, namely “reconstruction,” and “recasting,” to see that his exceptions are not semantic in nature. To be sure, they are substantive. This is further borne out by the fact that Murray believed that with the covenant of works

it does not appear justifiable to appeal, as frequently has been done, to the principle enunciated in certain texts (cf. Lev. 18.5; Rom. 10.5; Gal. 3.12), “this do and thou shalt live.” The principle asserted in these texts is the principle of equity, that righteousness is always followed by the corresponding award. From the promise of the Adamic administration we must dissociate all notions of meritorious reward.⁷⁸

What is important about Murray’s statement is that he takes issue with the teaching of the Confession, both in its statements as well as in its Scripture proofs, as Gal 3:12 and Rom 10:5 are cited in support of the covenant of works.⁷⁹ Now, what is particularly interesting about Murray’s comments is that his views go somewhat beyond the established parameters of both the S/K and Old School statements on subscription. Here, Murray is taking exception, not simply to wording or to propositions, but to constituent elements of an entire article in the Confession. How does Murray’s understanding of

⁷⁶ Ibid. 147.

⁷⁷ John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study*, The Tyndale Biblical Lecture (London: Tyndale, 1953) 5.

⁷⁸ John Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (4 vols.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977) 2.55–56.

⁷⁹ See WCF 1646 7.2; cf. 19.1.

the covenant accord with his own statements on subscription as well as the Old School understanding of the OPC?

Recall that the principle of Old School subscription states that a subscriber may take exception to propositions in the Standards. The subscriber may take exceptions to propositions so long as those exceptions do not undermine the overall system. With this in mind, we can see that though Murray reconstructs the Confession's doctrine of the covenant, his reconstruction still retains the integrity of the overall system. As a recent analyst observes:

Murray styles himself *a revisionist* in the light of classic Reformed covenant theology. He rejects the *foedus operum* and identifies his view with Calvin's, and from the vantage point of his own biblico-theological understanding, he replaces the term *foedus operum* with the term "Adamic administration." Nevertheless, in the final analysis, Murray's theology is, in general, compatible with the antithesis between the covenant of works and grace because he carefully adopts all the theological insights established by means of the bi-polar distinction.⁸⁰

This is how, then, Murray can still subscribe to the Standards—his conclusions, though through a reconstructed and revised route, do not affect the overall system. It is important to note that this is yet another example of how an advocate of Old School ideology practices his confession subscription. Murray's statements and practice do not accord with the S/K version of subscription. Moreover, as is plainly evident from his corpus of writings, the OPC did not restrict him from teaching and propagating his exceptions.⁸¹ Murray, then, stands in agreement in both theory and practice with Hodge, Warfield, Thornwell, Machen, and the OPC. With our survey of both representative Old School and OPC theologians complete, we can now briefly spell out the implications of our reconnaissance for the overall debate on confession subscription.

V. OLD SCHOOL IMPLICATIONS FOR CONFESSION SUBSCRIPTION

1. *Quia vs. quatenus subscription?* Throughout our reconnaissance the evidence has demonstrated that Old School subscription allows for more than semantic exceptions—they allow propositional and substantive exceptions. Moreover, we have also seen that whether it is the long geologic periods advocated by Hodge and Warfield (or propagated by Thornwell), Machen's views in regard to premillennialism, or Murray's views on the

⁸⁰ Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1999) 186.

⁸¹ In the minutes from Murray's ordination, he records only one exception regarding exclusive psalmody. His presbytery did not restrict him from teaching this exception (see *Minutes of the Presbytery of New York and New England* [26 April 1937] 11; and *idem* [28 May 1937] 12–13). Murray is not the only OP minister to have a similar exception free pattern despite what some might term as 'exception worthy' views. Greg Bahnsen (1948–1995) has no recorded exceptions for his ordination (see *Minutes of the Presbytery of Southern California* [4 August 1974] 349; and *idem* [12 July 1975] 433ff.). Meredith Kline (1922–) has never taken nor been asked to take an exception in over 50 years of ministry in the Presbytery of New Jersey (personal correspondence to the author, 4 April 2002).

covenant, all of these theologians were never restricted from teaching their exceptions. This brings us to an important implication, and perhaps the radix, of the debate. As was stated at the beginning of this essay, Smith and Knight agree that a subscriber receives and adopts the Standards as “the very doctrines of the Word.”⁸² Though, Smith and Knight are careful to caveat that they do not equate the authority of the Standards with the same authority of Scripture. Knight’s statement that a subscriber receives the Standards because they contain the very doctrines of Scripture hearkens back to the language of the Reformation. During the Reformation there was a debate surrounding the nature of subscription. Namely, to what extent can a confession be considered authoritative? Does the subscriber receive the confession because (*quia*) it is Scripture or is it to be received in so far as (*quatenus*) it is Scripture?⁸³ Moreover, in what category does Old School subscription fall? Identifying this issue will demonstrate yet another area of divergence between the S/K version of subscription and the Old School position.

It is important to note that Old School theologians such as Warfield thought it was a problem to subscribe to a confession in so far as, or *quatenus*, it accorded with Scripture. For example, in Warfield’s analysis of the actions of the Dutch Church in the early nineteenth century, he writes that “ministers were no longer pledged to the Standards, *because (quia)*, but only *in so far as (quatenus)* they accord with the Word, is justly pointed to by Mr. McEwan as fatal.”⁸⁴ Knight is correct in his assessment that Warfield, and Old School theologians for that matter, rejects this understanding.⁸⁵ On the other hand, one should not assume that Old School subscription is automatically of the *quia* stripe. On the contrary, Old School theologians are not in agreement with the S/K affirmation that the Standards contain “the very doctrines of Scripture.” This divergence between Old School and the S/K statement exists for several reasons.

First, to argue that the Confession contains the very doctrines of Scripture is to say that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the doctrines of the Bible and the doctrines of the Confession. This, however, is a logical impossibility. How is it possible to say that the Confession, which is a self-admittedly fallible document (WCF 31.4), contains the very doctrines of Scripture, which is infallible? All one must do is find one error in the Standards to invalidate the claim that they contain the very doctrines of Scripture. To affirm that the Confession contains the very doctrines of Scripture fails to take into consideration a hallmark teaching of the Reformed Faith, namely the difference between *theologia archetypa* and *theologia ectypa*.

Theologia archetypa, or archetypal theology, is “the infinite knowledge of God known only to God himself, which is the archetype or ultimate pattern

⁸² Knight, “Subscription” 129.

⁸³ Peter A. Lillback, “Confessional Subscription Among the Sixteenth Century Reformers,” in *Confessional Subscription* 35.

⁸⁴ Warfield, “Presbyterian Churches” 650.

⁸⁵ Knight, “Subscription” 137.

for all true theology.” *Theologia ectypa*, or ectypal theology, on the other hand is defined as “all true finite theology, defined as a reflection of the divine archetype.”⁸⁶ Along these lines Reformed theologians have also used the term *theologia in se*, or theology in itself, to denote “theology known in and of itself to the divine mind” as a synonym for *theologia archetypa*.⁸⁷ In other words, only God’s mind is capable of knowing the object of theology, God Himself, perfectly.

Man’s knowledge of God, on the other hand, is limited, because he is finite as well as hampered by the noetic effects of sin. Medieval theologians expressed the concept of man’s limited capacity for knowing God with a pair of terms. The first term is *theologia viatorum*, or the theology of the pilgrims or wayfarers. In other words, as long as we pilgrim to the heavenly city, our knowledge is incomplete. Our theological knowledge will be completed, though never to the level of God’s knowledge, or *theologia in se*, until we reach our heavenly destination and receive the *theologia beatorum*, or the theology of the blessed.⁸⁸ These concepts are based upon passages of Scripture such as 2 Cor 12:1–6, where Paul is raptured to heaven, experiences *theologia beatorum*, and learns things he did not know as a pilgrim on earth. This concept is also captured, for example, when Paul writes that right now “we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Cor 13:12 NKJV). These concepts are crucial for a correct theory of confession subscription. Why?

These concepts are important because we must recognize that only God possesses *theologia archetypa*, only he has *theologia in se*. Yes, we must recognize that God has infallibly and inerrantly communicated the knowledge of his being and actions in redemptive history, though we must take into account that he has not given us *theologia archetypa*, but he has instead given us *theologia ectypa*, or *theologia viatorum*, a theology of the pilgrims. To affirm, then, that we subscribe to the Standards because (*quia*) they contain the very doctrines of Scripture fails to take into account this epistemic gulf between the Creator and the creature. At worst, it is a deliberate affirmation, or at best an inadvertent one, that we possess God’s own knowledge, *theologia archetypa*, or at least a completed knowledge, *theologia beatorum*, when we say that we have the very doctrines of Scripture. If we possess the very doctrines of Scripture in the Standards, then how is one supposed legitimately to disagree or revise “the very doctrines of Scripture”? It is important to note that, yes, Smith and Knight do not carry their position to this extreme, but it is nonetheless the logical conclusion of their position. To say,

⁸⁶ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 299–300; q.v. *theologia archetypa* and *theologia ectypa*.

⁸⁷ Muller, *Dictionary* 302; q. v. *theologia in se*; *idem*, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 1.126–35. Also see Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 184ff.

⁸⁸ Muller, *Dictionary* 300, 304; q. v. *theologia beatorum* and *theologia viatorum*. See e.g. William of Ockham, *Quodlibetal Questions* (trans. Alfred J. Freddoso and Francis Kelley; vol. 1; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) §2.3, 104.

then, that we subscribe to the Standards because (*quia*) they contain the very doctrines of Scripture is also unacceptable and is not the position of Old School Presbyterianism. What, then, is the position of Old School Presbyterianism?

2. *Quia and quatenus*. One must recognize that the Old School position is neither *quia* nor *quatenus*, but is instead both. To insist that one must choose one or the other is to bring an unnecessary false dichotomy into the situation.⁸⁹ The fact that the Old School holds both is evident from all of the evidence that we have seen thus far. Yes, Old School theologians such as Hodge, Warfield, Thornwell, Machen, and Murray believed that an officer must subscribe to the Standards because (*quia*) he believes that they contain the very doctrines of Scripture, but at the same time in this act of subscription the officer can take exceptions to the Standards in so far as (*quatenus*) its propositions accord with the teachings of Scripture. This is especially borne out when Murray, for example, writes that

the human understanding is imperfect. However architectonic may be the systematic construction of any one generation or group of generations, there always remains the need for correction and reconstruction so that the structure may be brought into closer approximation to the Scripture and the reproduction be a more faithful transcript or reflection of the heavenly exemplar.⁹⁰

In Murray's statement one can see language that reflects the historic language of Reformed theology concerning the epistemic gulf between the Creator and creature. Notice Murray does not say that our theological understandings are the very doctrines of Scripture. He qualifies his statement by saying that our understanding is imperfect, that there is the need for correction, that our theology is but an approximation of the contents of Scripture, and that our doctrine is ultimately a reflection of the heavenly exemplar. Murray's affirmation is in a trajectory that goes back to historic Reformed theology.

One must recall, for example, what Francis Turretin (1623–87) wrote on this subject. Turretin writes regarding the authority of creeds:

Their true authority consists in this—that they are obligatory upon those who are subject to them in the court of external communion because they were written by the churches or in the name of the churches, to which individual members in the external communion are responsible (1 Cor. 14.32). Hence if they think they observe anything in them worthy of correction, they ought to undertake nothing rashly or disorderly (*ataktos*) and unseasonably, so as to violently rend the body of their mother (which schismatics do), but to refer the difficulties they feel to their church and either to prefer her public opinion to their own private judgment or to secede from her communion, if the conscience cannot acquiesce in her judgment. Thus they cannot bind the inner court of con-

⁸⁹ Cf. William Barker, "A Response to Professor George Knight's Article 'Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,'" *Presbyterian* 10 (1984) 68, n. 3.

⁹⁰ Murray, *Covenant of Grace* 5.

science, except inasmuch as they are found to agree with the word of God (which alone has power to bind the conscience).⁹¹

We see Turretin argue both principles, *quia* and *quatentus*. Officers must subscribe to the Standards *quia* they contain the doctrines of Scripture as understood by the Church, but they can bind the conscience only *quatentus* the teachings of the Standards accord with Scripture. This is the formula of historic Reformed theology as well as Old School Presbyterianism. It is the only formula that can guard against assigning the Standards too much authority and equating them with Scripture as well as guard against giving them too little weight and relegate them to impotence or a museum relic.

VI. CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay we have demonstrated that Smith and Knight are in agreement with Old School Presbyterianism as far as defining the nature of the system of doctrine in regard to subscription. The system of doctrine is not a list of evangelical fundamentals, no matter how biblical. Rather, the system of doctrine is every article and doctrine of the Standards. It is at this point, though, that the evidence exposes a divergence between the position of S/K and the Old School. While the S/K position allows semantic exceptions, the Old School position allows for propositional, or substantive, exceptions. Moreover, while Smith and Knight desire that officers not be permitted to teach and propagate their exceptions, Old School Presbyterianism does not demand this. Lastly, the S/K position maintains that subscribers must adopt the Standards because (*quia*) they contain the very doctrines of Scripture, whereas the Old School position maintains that subscribers must adopt the Standards because (*quia*) they contain the system of doctrine but that an officer may take exception to propositions in so far as (*quatentus*) the Standards accord with Scripture. These are the differences between the S/K position and Old School Presbyterianism. It is this legacy that the OPC has sought to maintain. The question one must ask, though, is, “Will the OPC continue to carry forth its Old School heritage?”

There are many within the OPC, and PCA for that matter, that believe that the S/K version of subscription is the only way to maintain orthodoxy in the church.⁹² Anything less, they argue, has invariably led to liberalism and the demise of the Church. Yet, this fails to take into consideration the *animus* of liberalism. The S/K version of subscription presupposes that all will subscribe *ex animo*. This is something about which liberals often have no scruples—dishonesty which manifests itself in the form of a pragmatic use of doctrine. Machen observes that the common man in the pew

does not see that it makes very little difference how much or how little of the creeds of the Church the Modernist preacher affirms, or how much or how little

⁹¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison; trans. George Musgrave Giger; 3 vols.; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992–97) 18.30.10, 3.284.

⁹² See e.g. Joseph Pipa, “The Confessing Church,” unpublished paper delivered at the 2001 PCA Pre-General Assembly Conference on confession subscription.

of the Biblical teaching from which the creeds are derived. He might affirm every jot and tittle of the Westminster Confession, for example, and yet be separated by a great gulf from the Reformed Faith. It is not that part is denied and the rest affirmed; but all is denied, because all is affirmed merely as useful or symbolic and not as true.⁹³

The OPC and its officers must recognize that no matter how strict and thorough subscription standards are, all one has to do is lie to defeat the great doctrinal Maginot line. Rather than try to be wiser than our predecessors, we should instead follow their lead. Our theological patriarchs faced foes as fierce as the foes we now face. If we deny this, then we are guilty of chronological snobbery—thinking that what is new is better, in this case that our enemies are fiercer.

If our Old School predecessors saw fit to employ a liberal but conservative subscription formula and saw it as the best method to maintain the purity of the Church over and against liberalism, it behooves us not to think that we are wiser than they. Sadly, however, this seems to be the current trajectory in the OPC—rejecting its Old School heritage. There is a current *Zeitgeist* within the OPC that indicates that it is either uncomfortable or ignorant of its Old School Heritage. It is revisiting issues that its Old School ancestors saw no need to address.⁹⁴ If the OPC decides consciously or unconsciously to abandon its Old School heritage and adopt a version of the S/K form of subscription each theological faction, like the premillennialists at the 1936–37 General Assemblies, will seek to establish a beachhead of confessional legitimacy for its own respective position. In so doing, other factions will inevitably make every effort to defend their theological soil to prevent the demise of what they believe to be the truth. Every single phrase of the Standards will then become a potential battleground. Should we not engage the challenges of the New Perspective on Paul, or the assaults of Open Theism, rather than debate theological minutiae and fiddle as Rome burns? This may also result in exactly what Machen did not want to see—counting of noses for or against a theological position. With the prospects of a theological melee of this nature, Machen thought it best not to form the OPC at all. Or, we can continue the legacy of the OPC's Old School heritage and recognize that officers can take substantive exceptions to the Standards and yet subscribe to the system of doctrine. In the end, the OPC must not forget its heritage, and like Machen before, we must have confidence in our brethren to subscribe to the system of doctrine of the Westminster Standards.

⁹³ J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (1925; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991) 34.

⁹⁴ See e.g. the Dr. Terry Gray case where the General Assembly upheld the indefinite suspension enacted by the Presbytery of the Midwest for holding views virtually identical to those of B. B. Warfield (*Minutes of the Sixty-Third General Assembly* 44ff., 91ff.). One must also compare the views of Warfield, Dr. Gray, and especially Machen on the subject of mediate creation. All three men are in basic agreement, yet the OPC upheld the indefinite suspension. By this action Machen himself may have been indefinitely suspended (see J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* [1937; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999] 129–42).