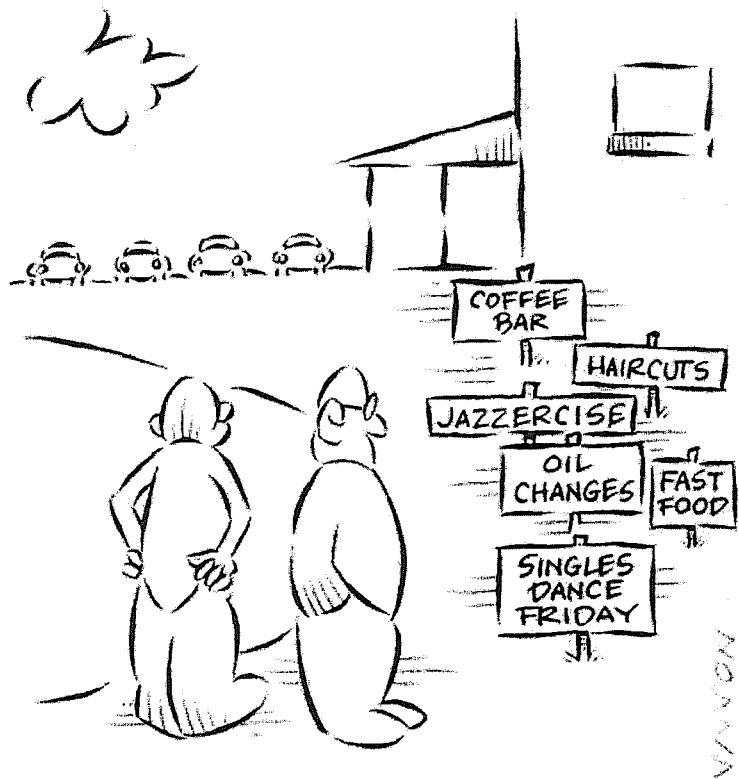




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YES, I THINK I'VE FINALLY FOUND
A CHURCH THAT MEETS MY NEEDS.

VINSON

CONFESSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION, STRICTLY SPEAKING



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*Objectivity apart from subjectivity forever escapes us in the quest for ultimate truth.*¹ —JAMES BROWN

The debate over ministerial and other elders' subscription to confessions of faith² is heating up again (it was quite controversial in Presbyterian and other Protestant circles in the 1800s³), with several parties forming around the particular degree of subscription they endorse—strict subscription, modified subscription, loose subscription, and, in some cases, no subscription at all. For the benefit of those outside the pale of formally confessional churches, “subscription” simply means formal, public avowal that one affirms a particular confession of faith, or doctrinal standard. It is a requisite for holding church office and, in some churches, even church membership itself. A confession of faith (sometimes called a “symbol,” or, if it is a summary or is brief, a “creed”) is a written statement of what a church or denomination believes based on the Bible. For instance, Presbyterian ministers and elders in many conservative denominations are required to

subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), either the original version of the 1640s, or, more frequently, the modified, American version of the early twentieth century. Lutherans subscribe to the Augsburg Confession or the Formula of Concord, Baptists to the London Baptist Confession or New Hampshire Confession, Anglicans to the Thirty-Nine Articles, and so on. Each church or denomination ordinarily establishes a policy regarding the *degree* to which its church leadership must subscribe. My objective here is simply to shed some light on the present subscriptionist controversy and to offer a balanced and (I trust) biblical approach to the entire subscriptionist question.

INESCAPABLE SUBSCRIPTIONISM

It is imperative first to recognize that confessionalism of some sort is inescapable. A confession of faith is simply a declaration of belief about what the Bible teaches. The WCF, for example, depicts itself as simply a systematic summary of biblical teaching. This is what almost all confessions do implicitly. Alister McGrath, in his discussion of doctrinal formulation, expresses this fact quite effectively:

Doctrine is historically linked with scripture on account of the historicity of its formulating communities. Christian communities of faith orientate and identify themselves with reference to authoritative sources which are either identical with, or derived from, scripture. A church that accepts the authority of the creeds does so on account of a belief that they correctly express what is contained in scripture.⁴

Even churches that deny formal, written confessions of faith are confessional—they maintain a particular interpretation of the Bible.⁵ This was made evident to me in an amusing way during a public debate several years ago with a Church of Christ minister. In delineating his differences with orthodox Calvinism, he argued that the (his!) Church of Christ denomination is “the only non-confessional Christian church left.”

All other churches, he claimed, have apostatized by requiring subscription to a confession of faith beyond the Bible, but Church of Christ ministers are required to bind themselves to the Bible *alone*. He went on in this vein for ten minutes or so.

When my turn for rebuttal came, I remarked in a bemused tone, “That was an interesting confession of faith we’ve been listening to for the last few minutes.”

All churches interpret the Bible, and all churches include and exclude both clergy and members on the basis of that interpretation—which in reality is a confession of faith. I know of a Baptist church in Texas that once claimed that the Bible *alone* is its confession of faith. However, had an Arian or Jehovah’s Witness attempted to join that church while claiming adherence to the “Bible alone,” the church would have refused the application for membership. Such refusal belied the church’s claim to embrace the Bible *alone* as its confession. The Bible must be interpreted; and confessions are statements of faith that articulate a particular church’s or denomination’s interpretation. And if all churches are confessional, they are as a consequence subscriptionist. All require some sort of *subscription* by clergy and members to a particular biblical interpretation.

STRICT SUBSCRIPTION

At first glance the arguments for strict subscription are quite impressive. Strict subscription is the idea that ministers (and occasionally members) must affirm a confession *in its totality* without any mental reservation whatsoever. Strict subscription is often simply the corollary of the belief that a specific confession expresses biblical teaching in every particular. For instance, Presbyterian strict subscriptionists often hold that the WCF is simply a summary duplication of biblical teaching. It states, though in different words, what the Bible itself teaches.

Strict subscription has, on its face, the benefit of preserving a high view of theological integrity. It takes its church’s doctrine seriously, and it takes defection from that doctrine

just as seriously. Strict subscriptionists recognize that the apostasy of many Protestant denominations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (usually liberalism or modernism) coincided with a relaxation of confessional subscription. If, for example, a traditional Calvinistic denomination begins to argue that predestination, the covenant, and substitutionary atonement should no longer be made confessional standards, it is really acknowledging that it does not care to be a Calvinistic church. Calvinistic churches require Calvinistic theological standards.

Over several generations, the natural tendency is for churches and denominations that once held to a strict doctrinal position to become lax. The children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the church's founders do not embrace as rigorously as did their forebears the theological distinctives that gave the church its doctrinal identity. Strict subscription counters this trend. *This is simply another way of saying that strict subscription tends to preserve intergenerational theological integrity.*

If these were the only factors to take into account, we could shut off the debate at this point and all simply become strict subscriptionists. The problem is that the issue is more complex than many strict subscriptionists allege.

Strict Subscription May Buttress Modern Errors

For example, strict subscriptionists see their position as a highly *conservative* force countering the attacks of modernity, but this surely is far from self-evident. A prime example is the contemporary controversy over literal six-day creation. Conservative ministers in the Presbyterian Church in America, embroiled in debate over this issue, have, for example, presented cogent evidence that the framers of the WCF had in mind literal twenty-four-hour solar days when they used the expressions "day" or "days" in the Confession. Of course, it would be unnecessary for today's conservatives to make this argument had the Confession's framers had the foresight to state explicitly that this was their meaning. I am being facetious because,

obviously, the reason they did not do so is that Darwinism had not reared its head in the first half of the seventeenth century; and thus the issue of the creation days in Genesis was at that time simply not germane. Conservatives who affirm literal six-day creation (as I do) may wish to argue *against* strict subscription on the ground that it prevents a confessional revision that would spell out more clearly what they believe to be the biblical teaching on this issue. The appeal for confessional revision, and therefore a repudiation of strict subscription, is not, therefore, necessarily a movement in the direction of "modernistic" modification. It could, in fact, be just the opposite—namely, the attempt to *avoid* accommodation to modernistic tendencies, which a less than explicit confession permits within the church.

Strict Subscription May Prevent Biblical Adherence

In a similar vein, strict subscriptionists sometimes argue that any modification of their position, and the Confession itself, permits moderates within their midst to argue for a less rigorous theological fidelity. This may be true, but it is a risk we sometimes must be willing to take. Take, for example, the issue of infants at the Lord's Table, or paedocommunion, a very controversial practice.⁶ In this essay, I am arguing neither for nor against the practice, but simply to show how its introduction into the debate may legitimately unsettle the rationale for strict subscription. The Westminster Catechisms (and other Reformed symbols) clearly do not permit paedocommunion—at least by implication. Therefore, strict subscription in the case of the WCF forbids this practice. When Presbyterian paedocommunionists of impeccable theological credentials advocate this practice, however, they are not attempting to undermine the Confession. Rather, they are attempting to relieve what they consider to be inherent tensions in the Confession itself. In other words, they believe that the implicit prohibition of paedocommunion does not square with the Confession's own articulation of the doctrine of the covenant. They may be incorrect in this argument, but

their strict subscriptionist opponents cannot convincingly counter that they are attempting to undermine the Confession. Such modified subscriptionists as paedocommunionists agree fully with the *substance* of doctrine set forth in the WCF. They merely wish to see this doctrine more consistently expressed at a few points.

HISTORICAL CONDITIONING

At this juncture, it is important to introduce the fact of historical conditioning. Every confession of faith is, to some degree, a reflection of the historical situation in which it arose. While we may agree, therefore, with Charles Hodge that “the Bible contains all the facts or truths which form the contents of [legitimate] theology,”⁷ we must recognize that this is a theological *objective* toward which we work, and not a once-for-all accomplished fact. The theological enterprise is the product of a confluence between the infallible Word of God (the Bible) and fallible reasoning interacting with that infallible revelation. The latter bears all the marks of the historical character of the individuals who produce it.

The most patent example of this in the case of the WCF is the identification of the papacy of Rome as the Antichrist (in the original WCF). The papacy was the greatest institutional enemy early Protestantism faced; and, to the minds of almost all Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it bore a striking resemblance to the Antichrist described in the Bible. Almost no one but strict subscriptionists to the original WCF (and other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant confessions) hold such a view today. From our vantage point, it does not seem likely that the papacy is what the biblical writers had in mind when they used the term *Antichrist* (and often the “Beast” of the book of Revelation). Further, the patristic writers almost all believed it referred to the imperial Roman Empire at whose hands they suffered persecution,⁸ and today’s orthodox preterists also dispute the early Protestant view⁹ (as I do). This early Protestant identification of the Antichrist seems to

be a rather obvious case of historical conditioning—the temper of the times played a decisive role in shaping their confessional decision at this point.

Strict subscriptionists believe in history very strongly, but they often (apparently) do not recognize *historicity*¹⁰—the latter being the phenomenon of man as a truly *historical* being shaped, partly at least, by the circumstances that surround him. There is a form of *secular* historicity (for example, in the writings of Martin Heidegger¹¹), and there is a form of *Christian* historicity (for example, in the writings of Cornelius Van Til). Van Til recognized man as a creature that cannot reproduce the truth as it exists in the mind of God. Van Til saw theology as what we would today call a “second-order theological construct.” In fact, he actually saw it as a *third-order* construct: There is truth as it exists in the mind of God; there is the truth as it appears infallibly, though anthropomorphically (that is, adapted to our creaturehood), in the Bible; and there is the truth as it appears in accurate, though fallible, theological statements that reflect reverently on the Bible itself.¹²

CHRISTIAN HISTORICITY

By “theological construct,” I mean a humanly devised expression or system based on an interaction with the text and teaching of the Bible. The Bible itself is God’s inspired, infallible truth in human language. It is a *divine* construct, adapted to the human mind and human needs. It is not the fullness of God’s truth; it is not comprehensive. It is anthropomorphic, suited to man’s finite, limited, human condition.¹³ This does not mean it is erroneous; it only means it is couched in *creaturely* language and concepts. It could not be otherwise if man is to grasp it. Man is, after all, not God.

Now theology is “twice removed” from the mind of God. It is surely removed from his mind directly, in that man cannot probe God’s mind (Isaiah 55:8–9). It is also removed indirectly, in that man’s theology cannot infallibly reproduce in its task the revelation of God as expressed in the Bible (or, for that matter, history and creation). It cannot reproduce (or

even access) God's mind, and it cannot reproduce (though it can access) God's revelation. This is what it means to say that theology is a *third-order* construct.

It is important to make this distinction. If we do not, we run the risk of imputing unerring divine warrant to our own theology, including our confessions (which in reality profess to be normative theology for the church). This is just what happens among many naive fundamentalists. They often seem to think that their own theological conclusions bear God's imprimatur, that their theology is no different from God's Word, the Bible. To be fair, however, even some reflective Calvinists seem to hold something akin to this. Carl F. H. Henry, for instance, defines theology in this way:

Christian theology is the systematization of the truth-content explicit and implicit in the inspired writings. It consists essentially in the repetition, combination, and systematization of the truth of revelation in its propositionally given form.¹⁴

It should not surprise us, therefore, that, while he acknowledges that no interpreter is infallible, Henry suggests, "The fact that no theologian has succeeded as yet in fully arranging the truth of [biblical] revelation in the form of axioms and theorems is no reason to abandon this objective."¹⁵ There is apparently no recognition of the inherently *human* and finite character of theology, or at least of the fact that the *product* of theology is human and finite. We applaud Henry and others for wanting theology to be biblical; all of us agree on this. My objection to his view of theological method is that it may subtly undermine Scripture's authority by holding that human theology can unfailingly reproduce the mind of God or the revelation of Scripture.

One of the great errors of much conservative theology is, in fact, the assumption (often unexamined by its proponents) that theology is an *analytical* enterprise, when in actuality it is *synthetic*. By analytical I mean simply an analysis in which the human subject makes no contribution to the outcome of his thought. By synthetic I denote that the human subject adds

(or subtracts) something, or in some way adjusts the product of the object of his reasoning.¹⁶ In the case of theology we say that theologians reflect on the truth of Scripture, and what they come up with is more *or less* a reproduction of what the Bible teaches. Their own historical context (upbringing, mental capacity, church affiliation, and so on) influences their theology. Theology is an amalgam of biblical truth and human reasoning. It could not be otherwise. If it were, it would simply be an exact duplicate of the Bible; and if that were the case, it would not be theology!

It is important to note, however, that this aspect of the theological enterprise is not entirely undesirable, as though the "best" theology (or confession of faith) is the one most effectively purged of the marks of human personality. If human personality is a barrier to "good" theology, it is hard to explain why God did not purge his Word, the Bible, from the human personality that is evident on every page!¹⁷ If human personality is not a barrier to the communication of infallible revelation *in Scripture itself*, it surely cannot be argued that it is a barrier to the communication of fallible *but generally accurate* theology. To be relevant, theology *must* bear the marks of historical conditioning, because history is the sphere in which that theology is designed to operate. And one aspect of historical conditioning is the human personality that writes (or speaks) theology (or confessions of faith).

This means that all "good" theology may not appear to be exactly like all other "good" theology. There can be valid variations. We may suggest that Calvin drafted good theology (to the extent that it is biblical) in the sixteenth century, but that it is not entirely sufficient today. We need more theology, building on the best of Calvin. Good theology is *both* biblical *and* relevant. If it is not biblical, it is false; and if it is not relevant, it is useless. Many of the issues of Calvin's time are not issues today, and many of the issues today were not issues in Calvin's time. Every generation needs a theology relevant to the issues of its time. This means every generation needs at least to consider a confessional revision (usually an addition) in light of new issues.

These are some correlates of a Christian historicity.

SECULAR HISTORICITY

The secular version of historicity often leads to radical skepticism—we cannot know anything truly because all we can *really* know are only our own thoughts: nothing “outside” us or “objective” to us can be known.¹⁸ The most obvious fallacy of this form of epistemological historicity is that it is self-defeating. After all, if everything is historically conditioned to the extent that there can be no objective knowledge, the idea of historical conditioning is itself historically conditioned and, therefore, not to be affirmed as objectively true. Moreover, the idea of radical, secular historical conditioning cannot account for historical *change*, which results from a break in the dominant culture. There must therefore be trans-cultural factors that can occasion this “break” in the historical flow; and if this is true, it defeats the idea of radical historicity. The secular version of historical conditioning is thus fatally flawed.

The Christian form of historicity is, by contrast, simply a correlate of man’s creaturehood. He is a historical creature made in the image of God, not an angelic creature existing beyond time.¹⁹ By God’s design, he is subject to the vicissitudes and limitations of history. Because he is made in God’s image and is designed to be a recipient of God’s revelation, he *can* know the truth.²⁰ He cannot, however, know it exhaustively or absolutely. His thinking is always “perspectival.” Part of this “perspectivalism” is the result of his existence as a historic creature. He can understand God’s truths, but he cannot understand that truth apart from the history in which God has providentially placed him; and this history shapes his perception of the truth. This historicity shapes his theological product no less than any other aspect of his thinking.

Take the doctrine of the Trinity as expressed in the Nicene Creed. This is an *accurate* summary of the biblical teaching. But it is not infallible—certainly not in the sense in which the Bible is infallible, because the Bible is God’s written revelation. Neither the Nicene Creed nor the orthodox doctrine of

the Trinity is a duplication of Trinitarian truth, as it exists in the mind of God. *If we could infallibly reproduce that truth, we would be God ourselves.* To argue that we can have access to the perception of truth as it exists in God’s mind is a form of epistemological idolatry. We can know the truth, but we can know it only in its creaturely form as it comes to us via revelation (Bible, creation, and history); and our theological constructs (like the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity) are based upon that revelation. Thus all human knowledge (theological or otherwise) presupposes some system of faith. There is then (1) absolutely exhaustive knowledge as it exists in the mind of God; (2) limited but infallible knowledge as it is expressed propositionally in biblical revelation and non-propositionally in creation and history; and (3) potentially accurate—though by no means absolute or exhaustive or infallible—knowledge as it exists in human theological constructs that interact with the Bible.

If this is the case, an unvarying strict subscription is undesirable. To be a consistent strict subscriptionist is to vest merely human theological statements with the authority that inheres in the Bible alone. In John Frame’s words:

If we ask for a creed in words that are different from Scripture, and if we demand perfection in that creed, then we are, in effect, seeking to improve on Scripture. Similarly, no definitive criteria for orthodoxy can be laid down once and for all. If such criteria were definitive, then they would be on a par with Scripture. . . . To keep them from usurping the role and authority of Scripture as the church’s *ultimate* standard, creeds and confessions *must* be amendable.²¹

This argument against strict subscription implies the reality and inevitability of theological development within history. In the words of Berkhof, “Religious doctrines are found in Scripture, though not in finished form, but dogmas in the current sense of the word are not found there. They are the fruit of human reflection, the reflection of the Church, often occasioned or intensified by theological controversies.”²² This fact

introduces a notable irony into strict subscriptionism itself. Had the framers of the WCF, for example, embraced what we today call strict subscription, they never could have produced the WCF! If, let us say, they subscribed “strictly” to some early ecumenical creeds (Nicene, Chalcedonian, Athanasian), for them *also* to have argued for strict subscription to a *new* confession, or even to have attempted to devise one, would be to acknowledge that those early ecumenical creeds as they stood were insufficient for the needs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The argument for confessional revision is necessarily the argument that the confession as it stands, however accurate, is an *insufficient* theological document. This is precisely what the framers of the WCF believed, and it is precisely why they felt obliged to produce that confession. They recognized that new times require new doctrinal formulations—not new doctrine, for to biblical Protestants, there is only unchanging biblical doctrine, but new doctrinal *formulations*.

This is another way of saying that every argument for strict subscription, taken to its logical conclusion, is an argument against the writing of creeds and confessions altogether, since it presupposes the insufficiency of present theological documents. This is no less the case with the Bible itself. The Bible is the sufficient revelation of the truth as an objective, divine deposit. But it is surely not sufficient for all dogmatic or instructional purposes. If it were, we would not need preachers or teachers, much less creeds and confessions. As Calvin argued in defense of the introduction of non-biblical language into the creeds, sometimes such language is necessary to ferret out heretics who hide behind strict biblical language, and whose error can be uncovered by forcing them to use language not found in the Bible but which nevertheless accurately elucidates what the Bible teaches.²³ If it is acceptable to preach and teach the Bible, applying the unchanging truth of the Bible to changing historical circumstances, it is equally acceptable to write new confessions and revise existing ones, applying that same unchanging truth of the Bible to those same changing historical circumstances. To assert that one may not do this is to undermine the rationale for the creation

of the very confession to which one “strictly” adheres!

MODIFIED SUBSCRIPTIONISM

It should be evident by now that what I am arguing for here is a modified subscriptionism. I am not arguing for *no* subscription, since that condition is an impossibility. Nor am I arguing for loose subscription, which does not take theological fidelity seriously. Nor, obviously, do I affirm strict subscription, for the reasons outlined above. Rather, I advocate that our clergy and elders be bound to a particular confession, *with the possibility of case-by-case exceptions to that confession and the provision for a more general confessional revision from time to time*. Anti-subscriptionists will claim that this smacks of popery, since it vests human documents with a measure of theological authority. The problem with this, as noted above, is that subscription of some sort is unavoidable, even in their own churches. Loose subscriptionists will chafe at the suggestion that church clergy and elders must be bound to a single confession, thus forfeiting “freedom of religious thought” and theological experimentation. To contend for loose subscription, however, leaves the door wide open to easy defections from the substance of biblical truth. Strict subscriptionists will object to my proposal, because it creates the risk of undermining comprehensive, coherent theological documents. But the fact is, this is a risk we *must* be willing to take, unless we believe that our perception of the truth is infallible. If we deny that *our* perception of the truth is infallible, we probably would equally deny that the perception of the truth on the part of the framers of the confessions to which we subscribe was infallible, and, therefore, that there may be the possibility of inconsistency or even error in the confession.

Modified subscription *requires* confessional subscription, but it permits churches and denominations to consider qualifications and reservations raised by, let us say in the case of Presbyterians, a particular minister in a church or session within a presbytery or presbytery within a general assembly. The attitude of modified subscriptionism is this:

We believe that our Confession of Faith is an accurate summary of biblical truth, but we do not claim that we, or the framers of this confession, are infallible. We are willing to consider that there may today be more accurate ways of expressing the substance of doctrine expressed in this Confession, and we are willing even to acknowledge that at certain points not central to the substance of the Confession, it may have been in error. We accept certain qualifications and reservations on a case-by-case basis. Let it be known that we will not overturn our Confession simply because a few people disagree with it, but neither will we refuse to listen to sound, biblical arguments as to ways in which the Confession may be imbalanced, or even at times somewhat flawed, and ways in which the truth presupposed by the Confession may be expressed more accurately and relevantly.

This proposal avoids, I believe, two pitfalls: (1) the erosion of confessional integrity that accompanies a denial of a firm requirement of subscription; and (2) the erosion of biblical integrity, and the possibility of historical irrelevance, by the refusal to consider qualification of, or reservation about, or amendment to our church confessions.

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