

“Creeding” Between the Lines

Animus Imponentis & Confessional Integrity in the OPC’s Creation Report

By Lowell A. Ivey

INTRODUCTION

The kudzu vine has been facetiously called “the vine that ate the South.” My wife and I fought a running battle with kudzu during my time in seminary in South Carolina. When we arrived, our backyard was completely covered with kudzu. The fence, in some places, could no longer be seen. We mowed over it and cut the vines from our fence line. But the kudzu promptly grew back. We had no way of knowing at the time what we were up against. Native to Japan, this invasive weed was first introduced to America at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. Its promoters advertised it as a hardy, fast-growing vine that would prevent soil erosion. In the 1930’s the federal government employed hundreds of men to plant kudzu as part of various public works projects. It now consumes 150,000 acres a year! The problem, particularly in the South, is that kudzu grows *too* well.

Often, like kudzu, theological principles find their way into the life of the church with far-ranging consequences no one could have foreseen. In 2004, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) released its “Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation.”¹ The report was sent to the sessions of local congregations of the OPC with the acknowledgement that a key principle undergirding the Committee’s conclusions would not be familiar to many in the OPC. In his summary of the actions taken at the 71st General Assembly of the OPC, Donald Duff, the Stated Clerk writes, “The General Assembly recognizes that the concept of the *animus imponentis* (the intention of the imposing body) is new to many people in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.”² What is the “concept of the *animus imponentis*”? Why is a principle unknown to many in the OPC employed as the basis for the conclusions of a study committee of the church? What are the long-term consequences for the OPC if it adopts this as part of its institutional

hermeneutic? In this paper, I will seek to answer these questions in light of their impact on the OPC’s view of confessional integrity.

ANIMUS IMPONENTIS

On February 6–7, 2009, the OPC’s Presbytery of Northern California and Nevada sponsored a conference on the topic of *animus imponentis* (AI).³ The speakers were Rev. Alan Strange,⁴ Dr. John Fesko, Dr. George Knight III, and John Muether. According to Strange, AI is an “old legal term” meaning, “the intention of the imposing body.”⁵ How “old” is the term? Strange offers no certainty in this regard, saying only that in ecclesiastical usage, the term dates to the 19th century. The term itself is so obscure that it does not appear in its compound form in *Black’s Law Dictionary*. While Strange cites *Black’s* in his lecture notes, it is only to define the

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1. Seventy-First General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, “Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation,” (Willow Grove, PA: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2004). Alan D. Strange (Chairman), Alan R. Pontier (Vice-Chairman), Bryan D. Estelle (Secretary), Leonard J. Coppes, John R. Muether, and Peter J. Wallace. C. Lee Irons served as secretary until he resigned from the committee in October 2003.

2. Ibid. (This statement appears on the first page of the cover letter included with the Report.)

3. Animus Imponentis Conference, hosted by the Presbytery of Northern California and Nevada, held at Covenant OPC in San Jose, California, February 6–7, 2009. The audio and unpaginated transcripts in Word document format are available at <https://www.pncnopc.org/audio/audio-presbytery/2009-animus-imponentis-conference/> (accessed September 27, 2021).

4. Now Dr. Alan Strange. This paper is a slight revision of the original written in 2013.

5. Alan Strange, conference lecture notes, p. 1.

constituent parts of the term—*animus* and *imponentis*. It is unclear, therefore, how the term *as such* has (or has not) been used in civil jurisprudence, much less how the term may (or may not) have been used in subsequent ecclesiastical parlance.

What then is meant by the term as employed by Strange? “We employ the term *animus imponentis* in ecclesiastical law then as a way of highlighting that in church law, as in civil law, attention must be paid not only to the actual words of the constitution itself but also to the intention of the body that would interpret that constitution.”⁶ This means that, in interpreting an ecclesiastical document, such as the Westminster Confession, “the most careful attention” ought to be paid to the actual words of the document itself.⁷ It is the *words*, in Strange’s view, that bind the adherents of such a document together in confessional unity. The words of the document are of primary importance for its interpretation.⁸

But while the words of a confessional document are of primary significance, they are not the *sole* basis for its interpretation. This may be illustrated from U.S. constitutional law. It is not merely the words of the Constitution that help us ascertain its meaning, but also the *original intent* of its framers. Strange explains,

The *animus* of the church, however, is shaped not only by the words of the constitution itself but also by the church studying and giving heed to what the original intent of those who framed the confession or its amendments was (among other things). Original intent, like *animus imponentis*, is also a technical term and refers to what the framers of a document, whether it is a civil or ecclesiastical constitution, had in mind when they wrote and adopted the constitution. Relevant to this task of ascertaining original intent, then, is a survey of the writings, public and private, of the framers, as well as any record of the debate that occurred in the process of drafting and adopting the constitution. So thus far we have the words of the Standards themselves, interpreting the words of Scripture itself, together with the original intent (as best we can ascertain that, often no small feat), all going to make up this thing we are calling the *animus imponentis*.⁹

In addition to the words of the document and the original intent of its framers, Strange adds a third element: the biblical-theological development of the church as she interacts with and receives “additional light” from Scripture and the confessional documents. Such development “permits the church to hold something more clearly or firmly than is suggested by what we know of the original intent, but never in a way that it at variance with any of the words of the Standards but interprets those Standards in a particular way.”¹⁰ Some have argued, for example, that the Westminster Assembly intended exclusive psalmody as *the* confessional stance on music in corporate worship. Historically, Presbyterians have moved away from that position; the OPC’s “Report of the Committee on Song in the Public Worship of God” is a recent (1946) example of such biblical-theological maturation. But Strange admits that exclusive psalmody is not an example of theological development that contradicts either the words or the intent of the Westminster Standards.

As Strange uses the term, AI is not strictly tethered to the actual words of the OPC’s constitutional documents or even to the original intent of the Westminster divines. For one thing, he notes that the Westminster Assembly was not an ecclesiastical assembly *per se*. The Confession of Faith and Catechisms adopted by the OPC in 1936 “were instead the product of a body that was advisory to the English Parliament.”¹¹ In other words, the Westminster Standards bore no ecclesiastical significance whatsoever until they were adopted (with some minor qualifications) by the Presbyterian Church in Scotland in 1649. Thus, AI has more to do with the intent of a particular “imposing body”—such as the colonial Presbyterian Church when it passed the Adopting Act in 1729 or the OPC when it adopted the Westminster Standards in 1936—than with the *original* intent of the framers of those documents. “Some might even regard such adopting acts by ecclesiastical judicatories as savoring more of an original intent situation than an *animus imponentis* one.”¹²

The AI, then, is not to be regarded as ultimately rooted in the words of the confessional documents, but in the *intent* of the ecclesiastical body that has adopted those documents. Strange is careful not to take this assertion too far, however. Like the Scriptures, our confessions must also be interpreted. Such interpretation is the work of the church as a whole, not merely of individuals. The purpose of the AI, in Strange’s view, is to maintain confessional unity in the church. In fact, the church has a duty to interpret the Standards in a manner consistent with the meaning intended at its

6. Strange, *ibid.*, p. 2.

7. Strange, conference lecture notes, p. 2.

8. Strange, conference lecture notes, p. 2.

9. Strange, conference lecture notes, p. 2.

10. Strange, conference lecture notes, pp. 2–3.

11. Strange, conference lecture notes, p. 3.

12. Strange, conference lecture notes, p. 3.

adoption: “It is inimical to constitutional government for the church to interpret her constitution in any way that is clearly at variance with its own words and the original intention of the framers/adopters. To disregard the Standards’ clear statement about a particular doctrine and to believe otherwise in spite of what is confessed is the mark of a declining, if not to say, [an] apostatizing church.”¹³

The nature of a confession is not to obscure what the church believes, but to *clarify* it. A confession is not a cloak for equivocation. Strange writes,

When the church comes to believe that the Scriptures teach something other than what she has confessed the Scriptures to teach, integrity demands she amend her constitution in the manner that the constitution itself prescribes for its own amendment. For the church to refuse to amend her constitution to reflect her current understanding but instead to read it clearly at variance with its plain meaning is to render the concept of the church as a confessing church meaningless. All this is to say that the concept of *animus imponentis* may not be employed so as to make a wax nose of the Standards and to pit the church’s interpretation of the Standards against the plain words of the Standards itself, particularly inasmuch as the Standards generally are thought to contain but few obscurities. Rather, *animus imponentis*, rightly understood and employed, means simply that the church as a whole in its integrity interprets its own constitution and that such interpretation, and not those of private individuals or lesser judicatories, is decisive.¹⁴

This has implications, then, for the church’s view of confessional subscription. Indeed, the question of subscription is at the heart of the entire AI debate. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the OPC’s Creation Report.

APPLYING THE *ANIMUS*: THE OPC’S CREATION REPORT
In 2001, the OPC’s 68th General Assembly established the Committee to Study the Views of Creation. Its stated purpose was “to examine the Scriptures and our Confession of Faith and Catechisms, to assist the church in its understanding of the biblical doctrine of creation with respect to the various views of the days of creation ... thereby assisting sessions and presbyteries in their dealing with officers and candidates who hold differing views.”¹⁵ Its work followed a similar report issued by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which contained similar conclusions. The one significant difference between the two reports was the OPC’s reliance upon the principle of AI.

In a section entitled, “The Days of Creation and Confessional Subscription,” the report addresses the original intent of the Westminster Assembly and the place of AI in confessional subscription. The authors of the report admit that, of those Westminster divines who committed their views to writing, there is no reason to doubt that the majority (if not all) favored a “days of ordinary length” view of the creation days. But does this mean the divines meant to specify the length of the days? The answer, according to the report’s authors, is clear:

To assume such, we believe, is to mistake the nature of constitutionalism more broadly and of the Westminster Assembly more narrowly. The nature of confession-making is such that on any number of points a significant majority may believe something together and yet choose not to make that common belief an explicit point of doctrine in the confession, prescribing the majority view and proscribing all others. It is not sufficient in seeking to ascertain the original intent of the framers of a constitutional document simply to survey their writings and discover how most of them viewed a particular subject. Rather, it is necessary that one demonstrate that not only did the framers have this or that particular view but that they sought to impose this view exclusively on the body politic and ecclesiastical. There is no known evidence that the framers of the Westminster Standards intended to prescribe that the duration of the creation days must be confessed to be days of twenty-four hours in length.¹⁶

It is at this point in the Committee’s report that alarm bells should be ringing. The authors argue on the basis of what is *not* in the Westminster Standards. They argue that because the divines did not *specify* twenty-four hours days, we, therefore, cannot assume they meant as much. This is an argument from silence. It is not incumbent on the proponents of the “days of ordinary length” view to prove that the days intended by the divines were twenty-four hour days. Rather, the burden of proof is on those with non-literal views to prove they were *not*. The authors of the report have given the impression that the divines were deeply divided on the question of the length of the creation days. David Hall has demonstrated conclusively that this was not the case.¹⁷ According to Hall,

13. Strange, conference lecture notes, p. 5.

14. Strange, conference lecture notes, p. 5.

15. Creation Report, 1601: 3–8.

16. Creation Report, 1657: 2624–2634.

17. David Hall, “What Was the View of the Westminster Assembly

...until written citations can be produced that fairly indicate some Westminster divines held to a long-age view, it is only fair that adherents to that position admit that they do so without earlier company and contrary to the earlier Westminster position. Later company may arrive, but we are still searching for *any* of the divines, *much less more than we have cited*...who held to a long geologic age for creation. That view still looks like a relatively recent modern invention, regardless of numerous adherents in our own century. Whether our studies have amassed five, eight, or nine incontrovertible witnesses to original intent, or 19 or 21, the amazing fact is that historians must finally agree on the original intent of the Westminster divines regarding the nature of the creation days, until they present primary and incontrovertible testimony from other divines to the contrary. Mere speculation and assertion without evidence will not be credible without primary documentation. Lacking that, an unbiased person would recognize any attempt to espouse the view that the divines held to a long day or framework hypothesis as little more than an unsubstantiated prejudice, anachronism, or dependence on faulty secondary and tertiary materials.¹⁸

Furthermore, the genesis of the phrase “in six days” in the Westminster Standards is James Ussher’s usage in the Irish Articles of 1615.¹⁹ It cannot be credibly maintained that Ussher intended anything other than six days of ordinary length. The Assembly’s choice of

Divines on Creation Days?” in *Did God Create in Six Days?* ed. Joseph A. Pipa and David W. Hall (White Hall, WV: Tolle Lege Press, 2005), pp. 43–54.

18. Hall, *ibid.*, p. 48. See also, William VanDoodewaard, *The Quest for the Historical Adam: Genesis, Hermeneutics, and Human Origins* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2015). VanDoodewaard surveys the whole scope of church history, from the patristic era to the present, and concludes that the modern interpretations of Genesis regarding the length of the creation days are historically without support until the arrival of the Darwinian theory of evolution.

19. *Articles of Religion Agreed upon by the Archbishops and Bishops, and the rest of the Clergy of Ireland in the Convocation holden at Dublin in the year of our Lord God 1615, for the avoiding of Diversities of Opinions, and the establishing of Consent touching true Religion.* “4. Of the Creation and Government of all things. (18.) In the beginning of time, when no creature had any being, God, by his word alone, in the space of six days, created all things, and afterwards by his providence doth continue, propagate, and order them according to his own will.” Cf. Jean François Salvard, *The Harmony of Protestant Confessions: Exhibiting the Faith of the Churches*, a new edition enlarged by Peter Hall (London: John F. Shaw, [1842]), p. 525.

20. Creation Report, 1661: 2769–2772.

21. Creation Report, 1661: 2777–2781.

22. Creation Report, 1661: 2783–2784.

23. Creation Report, 1662.

24. Creation Report, 1665: 2927–2928.

Ussher’s exact words clearly implies that they intended what Ussher meant by them.

For the purposes of the Committee, however, the exact wording of the Westminster Standards is less important than the “intent” of the OPC in adopting them in 1936. “Thus we must inquire as to whether the OPC in adopting the modified Westminster Standards did so in a way that sheds any light on the question that now concerns us of creation and especially the length of the creation days.”²⁰ The phrase “in the space of six days” was not debated by the OPC’s adopting Assembly. The Committee could find no record of any public discussion over the meaning of the phrase, and thus concluded “that even as we have found no evidence that the original intent of the framers at Westminster was to prescribe a particular length of creation day, we have found no intent on the part of the adopters of the Standards in 1936 to impose a particular view of the length of the days on those who would subscribe the Standards as officers in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.”²¹ Again, the Committee resorts here to an argument from silence.

Turning away from the actual language of the Confession the OPC adopted in 1936, the authors of the report draw attention to “an apparent allowance of flexibility with respect to the specific question of the length of the creation days.”²² By the time the OPC was founded, there was a long history, particularly among northern Presbyterians like Charles and A.A. Hodge, B.B. Warfield, and W.G.T. Shedd, of accepting nontraditional views. J. Gresham Machen and E. J. Young, for example, did not consider the length of the days to be a test of confessional orthodoxy.²³ But is the toleration of divergent views by some of the leading men in the OPC evidence of an *animus* of the church requiring such toleration? And even if such an *animus* has prevailed (for whatever reason), are officers in the church bound in any way by AI?

With these questions, we arrive at the heart of the issue in terms of AI’s practical application by the authors of the OPC’s Creation Report. In a section entitled “Creation, Credentialing, and Corporate Culture: This Present Question and the Licensing and Ordaining of Candidates,” the Committee notes that “there is no current constitutional mechanism for taking exception to the Standards or for expressing scruples.”²⁴ In my judgment, this is the section of the report calculated to have the farthest-reaching consequences within the OPC. At present, there are only two ways to deal with exceptions and scruples. The first way is the careful examination of candidates at the time of licensure and ordination. The

second is the judicial process. The problem is stated in the report as follows:

As our system currently operates, then, a judicatory, having heard any differences that a candidate may have with the Standards, decides, in the face of such differences, whether or not to proceed to licensure/ordination. It must be understood that if the candidate is licensed or ordained he enjoys all the rights and privileges of every other member of the body. We, as confessing Presbyterians, do not regard any members among us as ‘second class,’ on account of any scruples they might have expressed or exceptions they might have taken. There is no official mechanism outside of judicial process for a judicatory to license or ordain a candidate, and at the same time, prohibit him from teaching any particular doctrine. To be sure, a candidate should, out of integrity, refrain from teaching contrary to the Standards since to do so is inherently inimical to the concept of a confessional church. Likewise, judicatories ought always to exercise due caution and good discretion in licensing and ordaining candidates who take exceptions. It will be difficult for our church to maintain her confessional stance if we admit candidates whose non-confessional views undermine the very foundation which supports our ability to say the same thing together.²⁵

But who determines *the* confessional stance of the OPC? This, the Committee suggests, is the role of AI. Individual presbyters have the ultimate responsibility to vote according to their consciences in the church’s judicatory assemblies, but what should guide them in determining whether a particular exception or scruple ought to be allowed? The Committee’s answer is alarming:

First of all, a commissioner should vote as he in good conscience believes that he must before God. The oaths and vows that the commissioner has taken are an important part of what must inform his conscience, especially his vows of subscription to the Standards, his approving of the Church Order and his vow to submit to his brethren in the Lord. Secondly, then, the commissioner should vote *coram Deo* with an eye to the actual words contained in the Standards themselves as well as his understanding of the *animus imponentis*. This reminds us that conscience is not merely an individual matter. Even as the individual conscience is to be informed and formed by the Scripture, so there is a corporate conscience that is to be informed and formed by Scripture... The heart of confessionalism is that the church as a corporate entity reads the Bible together ...

The function of the *animus imponentis* reminds us that the church also has a corporate conscience which guides the exercise of individual conscience.²⁶

This reasoning seems to be at odds with the church’s confession that the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture is the supreme Judge in all controversies of religion.²⁷ Ultimately, it places Scripture alongside tradition (in the form of AI). This may not seem apparent on the surface. The Committee certainly acknowledges that the AI is nothing other than the church’s “corporate conscience” informed by its reading of Scripture and the Standards. But how are the Standards to be interpreted? The Committee’s answer appears to be: “with one eye on the actual words and the other eye on the *animus* of the church.”

But this begs the question: what are the words of the Standards if not an objective declaration of the *animus* of the church? The Standards, of course, are subject to revision. The church may certainly reevaluate its public confession at any time. As Ian Hamilton has noted, confessional documents are by nature *provisional*—they simply set forth what the church at a particular moment in history confesses to be the teaching of God’s Word.²⁸ Only the Bible has normative, or intrinsic, authority in the church. Confessional documents have, at most, a *derived* authority. Nevertheless, AI is not a legitimate mechanism for revising the confessional standards.

This point needs to be underscored in light of the Committee’s recommendations. While acknowledging a commissioner’s right to vote according to his own conscience—even to do so against prevailing opinions in the church—the report suggests that those who look only to the actual words of the Standards and reject the AI are motivated by a desire to impose their own idiosyncratic views on the entire church. “For individual presbyters to oppose candidates whom they might regard as confessionally unacceptable when the rest of the church does not so regard them potentially is vexing for the church. Especially troubling is the practice of voting against a candidate who holds views which are already widely held in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.”²⁹ Not only does the Committee question the motives of those who adhere only to the actual words of the Standards as “potentially vexing” the church, it subtly accuses such men of desiring to change the constitution.

25. Creation Report, 1665: 2948–2960.

26. Creation Report, 1665–1666: 2974–2990.

27. Westminster Confession of Faith 1.10.

28. Ian Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy: Drifting from the Truth in Confessional Scottish Churches* (Fearn: Mentor, 2010), p. 10.

29. Creation Report, 1666: 3003–3006.

“Presbyters who wish to change the constitution ought to seek some orderly process, apart from simply voting ‘no’ on candidates, to press their concerns upon the church, up to but not limited to proposing constitutional amendments.”³⁰

It is a sad irony that those who seek to adhere to the plain meaning of the actual words of the Westminster Standards are portrayed in this report as wanting to *change* the Standards. The careful examination of candidates in regard to their understanding of Scripture and the Westminster Standards is essential to the wellbeing of the church. It is not incumbent upon those who vote to consider *anything* other than the Scriptures and the Confessions in making their decision. No minister or elder in the OPC has sworn an oath to uphold the AI. In fact, the very idea is diametrically opposed to the spirit of Presbyterianism. While we esteem our fathers and brethren highly, and stand ever ready, by the grace of God working in us, to submit to the decisions of church councils, we reject the Roman Catholic notion of canon law. It is the mind of *Christ*, not the traditions of men, that presbyters must prayerfully conform themselves to in ecclesiastical deliberations.

THE ANIMUS AND CONFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

The OPC’s historian John Muether has written that, despite the presence of a “definite creedal sensibility” in the OPC this sensibility “is not the product of careful reflection on the part of the denomination, but rather the result of an unarticulated corporate culture.”³¹ He notes that the OPC has not had the same debates over “strict” or “full” subscription versus “system” subscription that other Presbyterian denominations (particularly the PCA) have had. While this is good, it may also be problematic in the long-term. Not having had these

debates, the OPC may be unprepared for an unbridled application of AI.

The proponents of AI depend almost exclusively on Charles Hodge for historical support. In doing so, they fail to articulate what Hodge actually meant by the term. In his *Discussions in Church Polity*, Hodge employs the term *animus imponentis* with reference to the subscription vows taken by officers in the church, *not* to the will of the church in regard to particular expressions in the confessional standards. Thus, the OPC’s Creation Report extends the meaning of AI beyond its historical usage by Hodge.³² Gregory Reynolds summarizes Hodge’s position with respect to AI:

Hodge distinguishes among three views of what the subscription vow commits a minister to when he declares that the Confession and Catechisms contain ‘the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.’ He subscribes to: 1) the substance of doctrine 2) every proposition 3) the system of doctrine....

Hodge explores the implications of the criteria for vows and oaths: 1) the historical meaning of the words 2) the *animus imponentis* (‘the intention of the party imposing the oath’). He concludes: “The Confession must be adopted in the sense of the Church, into the service of which the minister, in virtue of that adoption, is received.” Thus the intention of the church in its adoption of the confession, along with the history of its deliberations on exceptions must be taken into account.

Thus, Hodge concludes regarding view 1): “From the beginning, therefore, the mind of our Church has been that the ‘system of doctrine’ in its integrity, not the substance of those doctrines, was the term of ministerial communion...the phrase ‘substance of doctrine’ has no assignable meaning.” On the other end of the spectrum view 2) “is contrary to the *animus imponentis*, or the mind of the Church.” The “words ‘system of doctrine,’ have a definite meaning, and serve to define and limit the extent to which the Confession is adopted.” To require the adoption of every proposition or teaching is to invite hypocrisy and foster disunity...³³

At first glance, it might appear that Hodge’s view of AI is indistinguishable from that of the authors of the OPC’s Creation Report. But Hodge only employs the term as it relates to subscription vows. The ministerial candidate at his ordination is required to subscribe to the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the church “as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.”³⁴ It is

30. Creation Report, 1666: 3008–3010.

31. John R. Muether, “Confidence in Our Brethren: Creedal Subscription in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. David W. Hall. 2nd ed. (Oak Ridge, TN: The Covenant Foundation, 1997), p. 302.

32. I owe this observation to Rev. Stuart Jones from personal correspondence with him on the subject of AI. Jones shares the conclusions reached by the Committee in the OPC’s Creation Report, but is skeptical with their use of AI as the basis for them.

33. Gregory E. Reynolds, “The Nature, Limits, and Place of Exceptions and Scruples in Subscription to the Doctrinal Standards of the Presbyterian Church.” Available from: <http://www.amoskeagchurchof.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/The-Nature-of-Subscription2.pdf>. Reynolds’ quotations are all from Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity*, pp. 319–335.

34. Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church), p. 47.

the Confession of Faith and Catechisms that ministers in the OPC receive and adopt, *not* the system of doctrine. These are adopted *as containing* the system of doctrine taught in the Bible. Morton Smith observes: “the system of doctrine is not stated to be that contained in the Confession (though this is true in itself and is implied); it is identified as the system of doctrine contained in the *holy Scriptures*.”³⁵ Hodge understood this. In *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church*, he writes (regarding the Adopting Act of 1729), “There can be no doubt, therefore, that the adopting act, as understood and intended by its authors, bound every new member to receive the Confession of Faith and Catechisms, *in all their parts*, except certain specified clauses...”³⁶

What Hodge intends by AI is not the mind of the church regarding any particular doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards—but what is required for a man to honestly receive them in his subscription vows. S. Donald Fortson III writes, “The *Constitutional History* was an attempt to establish by documentary evidence that the first generations of American Presbyterians practiced full subscription to the Confession of Faith. Repeatedly, Hodge highlighted this issue. His contention was that the original Adopting Act affirmed a strict subscriptionist stance and subsequent synodical statements in 1730 and 1736 unequivocally strengthen this position.”³⁷ It is true that Hodge allowed for some diversity of opinion within the church in regard to the *propositions* contained in the Standards. He was not alone in so doing. Samuel Miller argues in the same vein.³⁸ There is room in the subscription vow for exceptions and scruples.³⁹ Such exceptions or scruples must not, however, impinge on the system of doctrine contained within the Standards. Furthermore, only the church, operating through her judicatory bodies, determines whether or not a particular exception or scruple affects the confessional system.⁴⁰ For this reason, officers in the church must clearly articulate their exceptions and/or scruples so that the church may determine whether to allow them or not.⁴¹

According to J. V. Fesko, the “Old School” view of ordination vows was that of “system subscription.” He contrasts this with “loose subscription” on the one hand, and “full” or “strict subscription” on the other.⁴² Fesko claims that Hodge sought a mediating position between the *quia* and the *quatenus* views of subscription.⁴³ System subscription allows for doctrinal differences among ordained officers holding to the same confessional standards but requires adherence to the system contained within those standards. Fesko writes,

Who determines when a substantive propositional exception is unacceptable? According to Hodge and Warfield it is the Church. 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...these men advocated their teachings even though one might be able to make a case that they contradict the *ipsissima verba* of the Confession. Now, it is this truly liberal but conservative formula that embodies Old School Presbyterianism that has been carried forward in the OPC.⁴⁴

35. Morton H. Smith, *The Case for Full Subscription to the Westminster Standards in the Presbyterian Church in America* (Greenville, SC: GPTS Press, 1992), p. 96.

36. Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1839), 159ff. The “specified clauses” had to do with the American revisions to the Westminster Standards, particularly in regard to the chapters dealing with Christian liberty and the civil magistrate. For a detailed treatment of the Adopting Act and early attitudes about subscription in American Presbyterianism, see D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), pp. 44–49.

37. S. Donald Fortson III, *The Presbyterian Creed: A Confessional Tradition in America, 1729–1870* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), p. 154.

38. Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1989), 77ff. This work contains Miller’s Letters VI–VIII of *Letters to Presbyterians on the Present Crisis in the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (1833) and *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions* (1824, 1839 [1841 printing]).

39. Legitimate exceptions and scruples have to do with the *manner of expression* of the various doctrines in the confessional documents. A candidate or officer may wish that a particular doctrine were expressed differently, and, for the sake of conscience, choose not to subscribe to a particular proposition. But every *doctrine* must be received.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

41. “The Standards were intended to govern who could be admitted to the church’s ministry. No candidate could be admitted unless he ‘declares his agreement with all the essential and necessary articles of said confession.’ Any candidate who found himself with ‘any scruple’ with respect to *any article* of the Standards must (as with the Dort formula of subscription) ‘declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod.’ The judicatory may admit a candidate with a scruple about the Standards only if it judges that ‘scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship or government.’” R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), p. 164.

42. Presbytery of Northern California 2009 Animus Imponentis Conference, Dr. John Fesko, Lecture 2, System Subscription.

43. The *quia* view of subscription corresponds to full subscription. It is subscribing *because* a confession is biblical. *Quatenus* is subscribing *insofar* as a confession is biblical.

44. J.V. Fesko, “The Legacy of Old School Confession Subscription in the OPC,” *JETS* 46/4 (December 2003): 673–698.

In his conference lecture, Fesko offers three examples of how this view of subscription has worked itself out in the OPC. First, Q. 88 of the Larger Catechism seems to rule out premillennialism, but this view is allowed. Second, the phrase “in the space of six days” has never been regarded as requiring an exception. Third, WCF 19:4 is not consistent with theonomy, but theonomy is accepted. In all three examples, the AI of the church is not in harmony with the plain meaning of the Westminster Standards.⁴⁵

George Knight, however, places the meaning of the phrase “system of doctrine” in its proper historical perspective. The system of doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms is an integrated whole. The Southern Presbyterian Church acknowledged this in 1898. Summarizing that body’s decision, Knight writes, “The ‘system of doctrine’ is not part of the truth, that is, either the basic gospel message or even Calvinism; it is rather ‘the *whole body* of truth contained in the Confession of Faith.’”⁴⁶ In this light, some statements of Hodge and others which are often advanced in favor of the more recent “system of doctrine” view seem to be taken out of context. “Hodge was saying simply that officers were not bound to every proposition in the confessional standards, and his emphasis is constantly on the necessity of embracing all the doctrines of the confessional standards.”⁴⁷ In other words, Hodge was not advocating a *media via* between loose and full subscription. He was *defining* system subscription as full adherence to the doctrinal content of the Standards.

Ultimately, the question is not what the OPC (or any other ecclesiastical body) has in practice allowed. The purpose of the Standards is to unify the church in its confession of the system of doctrine contained in the *Scriptures*. The Standards preclude premillennialism and theonomy because these views contradict the teaching of Scripture.⁴⁸ The fact that the church allows these views on the basis of AI is no proof that it has a *warrant* for allowing them. Likewise, the phrase “in the space of six days” is not only biblical, but has historically been regarded by Presbyterians as part of the system of doctrine they confess. The OPC, in adopting

the Confession and Catechisms, received those documents *in their historical sense* except where, by revision and amendment, they gave them a new sense. The church did adopt some of the earlier revisions to the Standards at that time.⁴⁹ Thus, we have an objective basis for determining the will of the imposing body in 1936. The expansion of the principle of AI in the OPC’s Creation Report sets a dangerous precedent. It undermines the practice of confessional subscription in the church by defining AI in terms of what the church has *allowed*, rather than in terms of what she has actually *said*.

CONCLUSION

It is too early to predict how far the tentacles of AI will reach. As with the kudzu vine, much of its development in the life of the church has already taken place beneath the surface—out of public view. Its roots are deep, even extending to the founding days of the OPC. The greatest danger of all is that many in the denomination continue to see AI as benign. It is not regarded as an invasive principle foreign to the spirit of the Reformed Faith. But what will happen to the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* if it is allowed to be crowded out by AI? Unless AI is attacked at the roots, it will continue to choke out historic confessional truth. Men like Luther, Calvin, and Knox boldly resisted the *animus* of the church when it contradicted the clear teachings of God’s Word. The Committee to Study the Views of Creation had the opportunity in their report to rearticulate the biblical doctrine of creation, which is the cornerstone of every other doctrine in the Bible. It had the opportunity to advise the church that the plain meaning of the words of our confessional documents is the basis of ministerial communion in the OPC. It did not. Its failure means that there is still no *animus* of the church in regard to the length of the creation days. More importantly, there is no *animus* in regard to confessional subscription. As AI advances in the OPC, it will continue to consume everything in its path. No doctrine will be beyond its creeping reach. Perhaps Machen was correct in saying that ours is not a confession-making age. If so, let us nevertheless hold fast the confession of our faith, relying on Christ to rule and defend His Church until He returns in glory to receive her to Himself. ■

45. Fesko, lecture notes.

46. George W. Knight III, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,” in Hall, *Practice of Confessional Subscription*, p. 131.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

48. An amendment designed to specifically include premillennialism as a legitimate view was rejected by the 1936 Assembly.

49. It retained, for example, the PCUSA’s elimination of the reference to the pope as “Antichrist.”