

# **[1]The Hermeneutics of Reading Scripture and the Symbols of Faith in the PCA: An Exploratory Essay**

by *Darwin K. Glassford*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The theological shifts which took place in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) and led to the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in 1973 are documented by Morton Smith in *How is the Gold Become Dim*. [2] This polemic work surveyed many of the crucial issues and articulates, by implication, Smith's vision for the PCA. One area that Smith explores in tracing the decline of the PCUS, which continues to be an area of contention in the PCA, is doctrinal subscription. Twenty-plus years later, the issue of doctrinal subscription, its intent and meaning, still raises emotions and elicits a variety of responses within the PCA.

The subscription debate centers around the second ordination vow, which reads:

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will on your own initiative, make known to your Presbytery (Session) the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow? [3]

The essential item of concern is subscription. Subscription involves the degree or depth of one's commitment to the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and Catechisms as "containing what the Bible teaches." [4] The degree of subscription is variously described by the two groups. One group is generally labeled as Truly Reformed, Strict Subscription, or Full Subscription; whereas, the other group is identified by Loose Subscription, System Subscription, Honest Subscription or

Broadly Reformed labels. (In this study the labels full subscription and system subscription will be used.) The purpose of this paper is to examine the hermeneutical issues involved in the debate between the two groups. [5]

Hermeneutics is the science and art of interpretation. As a science it makes use of some generally accepted rules. [6] As an art it requires the interpreter to make informed judgments as part of the interpretation process. Hermeneutics is a human activity; an activity which humans engage in whether conscious of it or not. [7] The hermeneutical approaches employed in reading the Westminster Confession of Faith are of critical importance, for without a thorough grasp of the methods being employed, both sides will continue to talk past each other and the rift which already exists between them will continue to grow.

This paper is an attempt to explore the hermeneutical dimensions of the subscription debate. This will be done by examining current understandings of the relationship between Scripture and the WS and the hermeneutical principles employed in the reading of the WS. [8]

## **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCRIPTURE AND THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS**

According to the constitution of the PCA, Scripture is always the final arbitrator in matters of controversy. [9] History, tradition, creeds and confessions provide additional evidence and support, but these are always subservient to Scripture. Scripture is the infallible rule of faith and practice. [10] Within the context of the subscription debate the relationship between Scripture and the WS must be examined.

Those advocating full subscription do not all speak with the same degree of intensity. Smith states, "full subscription is not placing the subordinate standards on the same level as the Bible. This is often the caricature that is made of the full subscriptionist. I know of no one who ever contemplated considering the Westminster Standards as equal to the Bible." [11] Yet, the caricature Smith complains about may in part be warranted. David Lachman, editor of *The Presbyterian Advocate*, wrote: "The Truly Reformed are thoroughly Reformed to the extent the Reformed and Biblical are synonymous, as we ought to believe if we take our subscription to our standards seriously...." [12] Those holding a full subscriptionist view believe the WS to be subservient to Scripture while at the same time according them a high degree of authority.

Those advocating a system subscriptionist view also acknowledge that the WS are subservient to Scripture. The question is, how much authority should be granted to the WS? Frank Barker in "What does Subscription to our Confession Mean?" emphasizes the binding nature of Scripture as being of greater significance than that of the Standards. He identifies the key issue when he writes, "We adopt the secondary Standards not as themselves equated with the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, but as containing the system." [13] Those advocating system subscription believe that the WS contain the system of doctrine taught in Scripture; whereas, the full subscriptionist equate it with the system of doctrine taught in Scripture. The two subscriptionists positions are depicted in Figure 1.

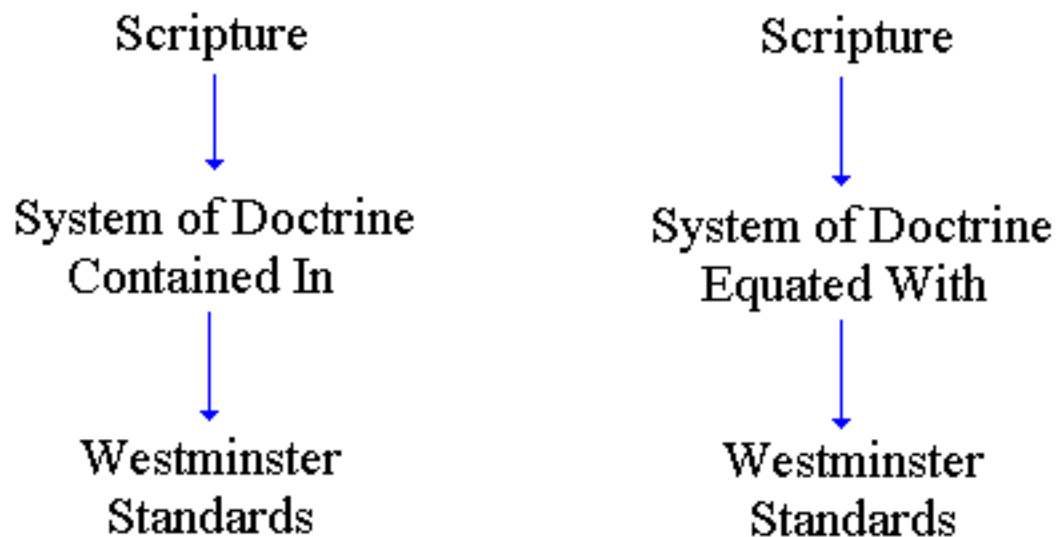
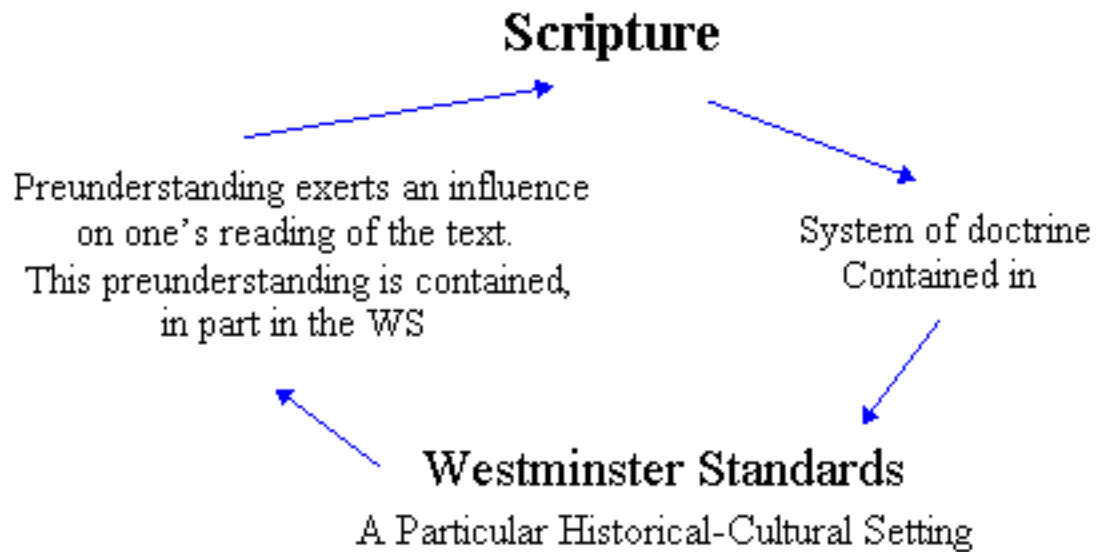


Figure 1

It should be noted that neither diagram accurately represents the relationship between Scripture and the WS. Gerhard Maier notes that one's preunderstanding influences one's reading of the text. [14] Thiselton echoes this same idea as does Long and Silva. [15] Nicholas Wolterstorff in his articulation of a Reformed epistemology makes the point that one's control-beliefs (i.e. presuppositions) will influence one's interpretation of any text. [16] In other words, one's worldview significantly influences one's hermeneutical approach and interpretation of a text. Again, the warnings of Schaff should be noted, creeds and confessions are not written in a vacuum. The WS reflect the issues, concerns, debates, etc. which the church faced during a particular period of history. A worldview approach to understanding the relationship between Scripture and the WS would be as follows: The Scriptures are the final and sole authority; the WS contain the system of doctrine the Westminster Divines believed was taught in Scripture and was relevant to the church's historical-cultural setting; the beliefs held by the Westminster Divines reflect more or less a preunderstanding which exerted some influence and

control over their reading and interpreting of Scripture; this does not preclude the role of the Holy Spirit who illumines and protects. [17] Figure 2 represents this approach.



**Figure 2**

To conclude this section, Scripture is the final arbitrator, the WS reflect one's hermeneutics and exert some influence over one's reading of Scripture. The full and system subscriptionist's approaches do not adequately explore the relationship and thus in their interactions with each other have neglected to

devise or describe the precise nature of the relationship between Scripture and the WS. In essence, this leads the full subscriptionists to cite the WS uncritically: whereas, the system subscriptionist may be overly critical without warrant. The worldview approach may provide a needed corrective to the discussion. [18]

## HERMENEUTICS AND THE SYMBOLS OF FAITH

The hermeneutical approaches used in reading the symbols of faith, WS, will be greatly influenced by one's Biblical hermeneutic. One tends to be more conscious of the latter hermeneutic than the former one. Richard Pratt in He Gave Us Stories [19] identifies three hermeneutical approaches: Subjective, Objective and Authority-Dialogue. These three approaches described by Pratt will be used as a framework for examining the hermeneutical principles used in the reading and interpreting of the WS.

## The Subjective Approach

The subjective approach focuses on the significance of the WS for the reader. There is little concern for the historical context of the document. Individual reason provides the necessary checks and balances. This approach has its roots in existentialism, modernism and in its extremes the reader-response theories of post-modernism. [20] The tendency within more conservative groups is to locate the significance of the text in the reader's experience. In many ways it appears to be a latent neo-orthodoxy. [21] By locating the significance of the text in the reader's experience, individual experience becomes the interpretative and validating grid for reading and interpreting the WS, rather than the WS serving as the basis for interpreting one's experience. Those advocating this approach will argue that the Holy Spirit facilitates and causes certain experiences which shape and mold one's self and reading of the WS. The tendency then becomes to reinterpret the WS to comport with one's experience. [22] Maier offers an important caution when he writes, "experience as such offers no possibility to distinguish true and false doctrine from each other." [23] Given the Reformed tradition's high view of Scripture and the tendency towards an "intellectualized" faith, a purely subjective approach is not prevalent in the PCA. Although, there appears to be some "rumored" tendencies in this direction. [24] The tendency towards a subjective approach is evident in the following excerpt from a letter written by a PCA pastor to his congregation. [25] (My comments are enclosed in brackets.)

I know that my evaluation of our local renewal ... is greatly influenced, of course, by necessity and without apology by what I have seen, heard, and felt during the last two months and the last 37 years. Your evaluation will [sic] be greatly effected by that as well. I write, in part, to share my experiences. My experiences will not be as real or vivid or persuasive as your own. Nevertheless, we draw conclusions constantly via testimony we regard as adequate or persuasive. [Drawing on his experience he offers an account of his experiences at various revival meetings led by a Vineyard pastor. Although, Scripture is mentioned and a number of individuals are cited, there is no clear exposition of Scripture or reference to Chapter 1 of the WCF. One is left wondering what is the relationship between Scripture and the confession. What or who is the final arbitrator? In discussing an objection on the role of experience and it becoming the basis of authority and detracting from one's focus on God, he writes:] It has often happened that people who have neat experiences started trusting in the experience, not in God. Our sinful hearts can distort any good gift of God, but this is not reason to reject the gift. The Lord has given us unchanging truth as the foundation for our lives, but he builds on that foundation in many ways - by truth and by experiences. We all say God grows us up through painful experience. Why not through joyful one's too? Surely God

uses both. Given our back-ground as Bible-thumping, reformed [sic] Presbyterians we have some wonderful safeguards against this error. We are rightly a 'people of the Book.' But we must also be a people of the Spirit. Biblical Christianity is undeniably emotional. The fruits of the Spirit include joy and peace. Holy worship is fervent and alive. Saints of God do laugh and weep and groan. I, for one, believe that an indicator of genuine Christianity, and certainly revival is the presence and abundance of biblically valid emotions.

The above illustration points to several difficulties with a subjective approach to reading and interpreting the Standards. There are six which should be noted.

1. A subjective approach can lead to a dualistic view regarding the relationship between the Word and Spirit. Walsh and Middleton, and more recently Spykman, call for a monistic approach which does not allow the Word to be separated from the Spirit, this is perceived as a false dichotomy. Spykman goes on to state that the Word of God stands in a mediating relationship between God and creation in Reformational Theology. [26]
2. The subjective approach fails to grasp the role and place of historical theology and tradition in the interpretative process. [27]
3. The subjective approach ignores the impact of one's preunderstanding on the reading and interpretation of Scripture and the WS. [28]
4. The subjective approach denies the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. [29]
5. The subjective approach depreciates the insights of others because experiences are unique to the individual.
6. The subjective approach is in essence anthropomorphic. It is a human-centered approach whose basic assumptions are at variance with Scripture's own understanding of itself. [30]

Among those advocating a system subscription approach to the WS a more subjective or experiential approach is sometimes evident. This is always a danger, especially when the Church and its people dwell in the midst of a culture which places a greater emphasis on experience and personal truth at the expense of community and shared truth.

## Objective Approach

The objective approach views the reader as being unbiased and able to discern the authorial intent of the text. [31] The gap which exists between the reader and text, by implication, is inconsequential. Thus, the interpretation of the Scriptures contained in the WS are in essence, synonymous, with Scripture. Or to use earlier

language, the system of doctrine contained in the Biblical texts is equated with the system of doctrine in the WS. To quote Smith,

Strict or full subscriptionist takes at face value the second question above, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures...?" It 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. [32]

The objective approach strives to discern and take seriously authorial intent. It believes that words have meaning and that those meanings are significant. On the other hand, the objective approach does present some unique problems. For the WS were written in response to a particular historical setting and addresses in part, the unique questions which the Church faced during that period.

For example, one point of continuing controversy is the nature of the Sabbath, especially what is permissible "recreation." The WCF states that one should not partake in "worldly recreation." This is often taken to mean that one should not participate in any recreation on the Sabbath, unless you talk about spiritual things. There are two considerations in this debate which are often ignored. First, does the Old Testament term for Sabbath accurately convey the fuller and richer New Testament understanding, which is often described by the term the Lord's Day? [33] And second, what were the Westminster Divines concerned about? What type of "worldly recreation" were they condemning? To assume that the Divines' understanding of "worldly recreation" entails all recreation on the Sabbath (read Lord's Day) ignores the historical-cultural context and the traditional conventions of language and communication.

The full subscriptionist's use of an objective hermeneutic is not without its problems. The following difficulties with the objective approach should be noted.

1. The objective approach does not recognize the effects of one's preunderstanding on understanding and interpretation of the WS. [34]
2. The objective approach tends to be reactive in posture. In other words, those holding this position tend to define themselves in opposition to others - we do not believe what they believe - rather than pro-actively articulating what is believed.
3. The objective approach tends to equate one's interpretation with authorial intent. [35]
4. The objective approach assumes that the WS are the high point in theology.

It implies that theological inquiry and understanding has declined since that point.

5. The objective approach assumes that the issues currently confronting the Church are synonymous, or perhaps essentially similar, to those faced by the Church during the Westminster Assembly.
6. The objective method depreciates the role of scholarship in several fields due to the authority it invests in the written text as expressed in the WS. Therefore, new data gathered from Biblical as well as other disciplines which might challenge the WS interpretation of Scripture is examined on the basis of its conformity with the WS rather than on its own merit.

The full subscriptionist tends to use an objective approach when reading the WS. Their belief that the doctrine found in the WS is to be equated with that found in Scripture propels them in this direction. Thus, to disagree with them is to disagree with the teachings of the Word and the Standards. There is little, if no, room for dialogue. The hermeneutics employed are problematic to the subscriptionist debate as a whole. Traditionally a word's meaning is dependent on the context in which it is used. That context is generally considered linguistic and grammatical. Yet the historical and cultural context, which appear to be neglected, also play a significant role.

## Authority-Dialogue Approach

Pratt describes this approach when he writes, "Dialogues with authorities contains at least two common elements. On the one hand, we come with our own expectations and questions that prepare us for meaningful dialogue. On the other hand, we come fully yearning for understanding beyond our own ideas." [36] This approach is best identified with a system subscriptionist approach to the Standards, which believes that the system of doctrine taught in the Scripture is contained within the Standards and is not limited to it. [37]

The authority-dialogue approach strives to take seriously the reader's worldview and its effects on understanding and interpreting the WS. It also recognizes that one's presuppositions must be submitted to Scripture and the WS and be open to revision when necessary. The authority-dialogue approach will generally use a grammatical-historical hermeneutic. In other words, the WS must first be understood in their historical context before their significance for the present context can be determined. The Church, according to the proponents of this view should be "Reformed and always reforming." The Church, as well as Christians, are called to constantly bring their beliefs under the scrutiny of Scripture and to reform those beliefs, if necessary, so that they are consistent with Scripture.

The authority-dialogue approach believes that the doctrinal framework contained in the WS transcends space and time; although, some of the particulars may no longer be relevant. For example, in WCF XII.2, it states that "The first covenant with man was a covenant of works." The phrase "covenant of works" is not found in Genesis 1-2. Also, this seems to imply that there were two covenants - a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. But, Scripturally there has only been one covenant - a covenant of grace. In order to retain the "covenant of works" it would have to be read as an administrative covenant as suggested by McComiskey in *The Covenants of Promise*. [38] The WCF's language regarding the "covenant of works" is unclear and theologically inaccurate. The authority-dialogue approach would challenge one to revise the WCF in light of Scripture so that it would more accurately represent the system of doctrine in Scripture.

The authority-dialogue approach takes seriously the effects of sin on both the Westminster Divines and the reader. It recognizes the cultural-context and its bearing on the WS without it being used to relativize the text. The very nature of this approach makes it a community and public affair. Thus, one's understanding must pass the muster of the saints, be subject to the community and come under the authority of Scripture. This is essentially the approach taken in the Proposed Statement of Identity for the Presbyterian Church in America.

The authority-dialogue approach allows one to consider fresh insights from Scripture as well as raise questions dealing with contemporary issues. This approach encourages questions so that the Church, through her symbols of faith, can address society in a meaningful and relevant manner. It challenges the church to be proactive in her deliberations.

## Summary

Symbols of faith are meant to be rewritten. As the culture in which the church dwells changes, she must be willing to articulate her beliefs in light of the issues being face and in a manner that is clear and understandable to the population at large. The subscription debate is a controversy about hermeneutics - one's reading and interpreting the WS. Is there a way out? Let me suggest five items for consideration.

1. A clear and concise statement must be adopted which articulates the precise relationship between Scripture and the WS.
2. A re-examination of the doctrine of sin and its noetic effects as it applies to this debate needs to take place.
3. A clear commitment to a Reformed epistemology which emphasizes the impact of one's worldview or preunderstanding in reading and interpreting

texts needs to articulated.

4. A proactive approach to study and deliberation needs to be encouraged. This involves a willingness to wrestle with questions afresh and deal with the moral complexity of modern life. The Church must be willing to speak boldly and compassionately.
5. An attempt must be made, recognizing the implicit dangers, to being a Reformed Church which is always reforming.

The PCA is being torn apart by competing visions. These visions are clothed in hermeneutical dress. The Church is in need of a Confession of Faith which is believed to be consistent with Scripture and addresses the current cultural situation in a meaningful, intelligent, compassionate and accessible manner. If this challenge is neglected, then the Church's agenda will be dictated by culture rather than allowing it to live, preach and minister redemptively and transformationally in the name of Christ.

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