

What is the "System of Doctrine?"

By the REV. PROF. CHARLES HODGE, D.D., LL.D.

Professor in Princeton Theological Seminary, 1822-1878

[The following article consists of extracts from the volume by Charles Hodge entitled "Church Polity." This work was issued posthumously, and is made up of articles published separately by the great theologian in his lifetime. It is of special interest now because of renewed discussion of the meaning of the phrase "System of Doctrine" pursuant to the organization of The Presbyterian Church of America. While the editor has had to make one or two transpositions in combining two separate articles on the same subject, the material is all from the pen of Dr. Hodge. One article, entitled "Adoption of the Confession of Faith," appeared in the Princeton Review for 1858, p. 669; the other was on "The General Assembly," from the Princeton Review for 1867, p. 506. Dr. Hodge's references to "our church" refer throughout to the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. as it existed in 1858 as the "Old School" body, and in 1867 in view of the then approaching reunion with the "New School." Since The Presbyterian Church of America claims to continue "the true spiritual succession" of the old body, all that Dr. Hodge writes is applicable and pertinent to the understanding of the sense the words should bear in the new organization.]

THE question put to every candidate for ordination in our Church, is in these words: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?" It is plain that a very serious responsibility before God and man is assumed by those who return an affirmative answer to that question. It is something more than ordinary falsehood, if our inward convictions do not correspond with a profession made in presence of the Church, and as the condition of our receiving authority to preach the Gospel. In such a case we lie not only unto man, but unto God; because such professions are of the nature of a vow, that is, a promise or profession made to God.

The Principle of Creed-Subscription

It is no less plain that the candidate has no right to put his own sense upon the words propounded to him. He has no right to select from all possible meanings which the words may bear, that particular sense which suits his purpose, or which, he thinks, will save his conscience. It is well known that this course has been openly advocated, not only by the Jesuits, but by men of this generation, in this country and in Europe. The "chemistry of thought," it is said, can make all creeds alike. Men have boasted that they could sign any creed. To a man in a balloon the earth appears a plane, all inequalities on its surface being lost in the distance. And here is a philosophic elevation from which all forms of human belief look alike. They are sublimed into general formulas, which include them all and distinguish none. Professor Newman, just before his open apostasy, published a tract in which he defended his right to be in the English Church while holding the doctrines of the Church of Rome. He claimed for himself and others the privilege of signing the Thirty-nine articles in a "non-natural sense"; that is, in the sense which he chose to put upon the words. This shocks the common sense and the common honesty of men. There is no need to argue the matter. The turpitude of such a principle is much more clearly seen intuitively than discursively. The two principles which, by the common consent of all honest men, determine the interpretation of oaths and professions of faith, are, first, the plain, historical meaning of the words; and secondly, the *animus imponentis*, that is, the intention of the party imposing the oath or requiring the profession. The words, therefore, "system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures," are to be taken in their plain, historical sense. A man is not at liberty to understand the words "Holy Scriptures," to mean all books written by holy men, because although that interpretation might consist with the signification of the words, it is inconsistent with

the historical meaning of the phrase. Nor can he understand them, as they would be understood by Romanists, as including the Apocrypha, because the words being used by a Protestant Church, must be taken in a Protestant sense. Neither can the candidate say, that he means by "system of doctrine" Christianity as opposed to Mohammedanism, or Protestantism, as opposed to Romanism, or evangelical Christianity, as distinguished from the theology of the Reformed (*i.e.* Calvinistic) Churches, because the words being used by a Reformed Church, must be understood in the sense which that Church is known to attach to them. If a man professes to receive the doctrine of the Trinity, the word must be taken in its Christian sense, the candidate cannot substitute for that sense the Sabellian idea of a modal Trinity, nor the philosophical trichotomy of Pantheism. And so of all other expressions which have a fixed historical meaning. Again, by the *animus imponentis* in the case contemplated, is to be understood not the mind or intention of the ordaining bishop in the Episcopal Church, or of the ordaining presbytery in the Presbyterian Church. It is the mind or intention of the Church, of which the bishop or the presbytery is the organ or agent. Should a Romanizing bishop in the Church of England give "a non-natural" sense to the Thirty-nine articles, that would not acquit the priest, who should sign them in that sense, of the crime of moral perjury; or should a presbytery give an entirely erroneous interpretation to the Westminster Confession, that would not justify a candidate for ordination in adopting it in that sense. 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. These are simple principles of honesty, and we presume they are universally admitted, at least so far as our Church is concerned.

The question however is, What is the true sense of the phrase, "system of doctrine," in our ordination service? or, What does the Church

understand the candidate to profess, when he says that he "receives and adopts the Confession of Faith of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures"?

There are three ways in which these words have been, and still are, interpreted. First, some understand them to mean that every proposition contained in the Confession of Faith is included in the profession made at ordination. Secondly, others say that they mean just what the words import. What is adopted is the "system of doctrine." The system of the Reformed Churches is a known and admitted scheme of doctrine, and that scheme, nothing more or less, we profess to adopt. The third view of the subject is, that by the system of doctrine contained in the Confession is meant the essential doctrines of Christianity and nothing more.

The First View: "Every Proposition of the Confession"

As to the first of these interpretations it is enough to say: 1. That it is not the meaning of the words. There are many propositions contained in the Westminster Confession which do not belong to the integrity of the Augustinian, or Reformed system. A man may be a true Augustinian or Calvinist, and not believe that the Pope is the Antichrist predicted by St. Paul; or that the 18th chapter of Leviticus is still binding. 2. Such a rule of interpretation can never be practically carried out, without dividing the Church into innumerable fragments. It is impossible that a body of several thousand ministers and elders should think alike on all the topics embraced in such an extended and minute formula of belief. 3. Such has never been the rule adopted in our Church. Individuals have held it, but the Church as a body never has. No prosecution for doctrinal error has ever been attempted or sanctioned, except for errors which were regarded as involving the rejection, not of explanations of doctrines, but of the doctrines themselves.

For example, our Confession teaches the doctrine of original sin. That doctrine is essential to the Reformed or Calvinistic system. Any man who denies that doctrine, thereby rejects the system taught in our Confession, and cannot with a good con-

science say that he adopts it. Original sin, however, is one thing; the way in which it is accounted for, is another. The doctrine is, that such is the relation between Adam and his posterity, that all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, are born in a state of sin and condemnation. Any man who admits this, holds the doctrine. But there are at least three ways of accounting for this fact. The scriptural explanation as given in our standards is, that the "covenant being made with Adam not only for himself, but also for his posterity, all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression." The fact that mankind fell into that estate of sin and misery in which they are born, is accounted for on the principle of representation. Adam was constituted our head and representative, so that his sin is the judicial ground of our condemnation and of the consequent loss of the Divine image, and of the state of spiritual death in which all men come into the world. This, as it is the scriptural, so it is the Church view of the subject. It is the view held in the Latin and Lutheran, as well as in the Reformed Church, and therefore belongs to the Church catholic. Still it is not essential to the doctrine. Realists admit the doctrine, but unsatisfied with the principle of representative responsibility, assume that humanity as a generic life, acted and sinned in Adam, and, therefore, that his sin is the act, with its demerit and consequences, of every man in whom that generic life is individualized. Others, accepting neither of these solutions, assert that the fact of original sin (*i.e.*, the sinfulness and condemnation of man at birth) is to be accounted for in the general law of propagation. Like begets like. Adam became sinful, and hence all his posterity are born in a state of sin, or with a sinful nature. Although these views are not equally scriptural, or equally in harmony with our Confession, nevertheless they leave the doctrine intact, and do not work a rejection of the system of which it is an essential part.

So also of the doctrine of inability. That man is by the fall rendered utterly indisposed, opposite, and disabled to all spiritual good, is a doctrine of the Confession as well as of Scripture. And it is essential to the

system of doctrine embraced by all the Reformed Church. Whether men have plenary power to regenerate themselves; or can co-operate in the work of their regeneration; or can effectually resist the converting grace of God, are questions which have separated Pelagians, the later Romanists, Semi-Pelagians, Lutherans, and Arminians, from Augustinians or Calvinists. The denial of the inability of fallen man, therefore, of necessity works the rejection of Calvinism. But if the fact be admitted, it is not essential whether the inability be called natural or moral; whether it be attributed solely to the perverseness of the will, or to the blindness of the understanding. These points of difference are not unimportant; but they do not affect the essence of the doctrine.

Our Confession teaches that God fore-ordains whatever comes to pass; that he executes his decrees in the works of creation and providence; that his providential government is holy, wise, and powerful, controlling all his creatures and all their actions; that from the fallen mass of men he has, from all eternity, of his mere good pleasure, elected some to everlasting life; that by the incarnation and mediatorial work of his eternal Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the effectual working of his Spirit, he has rendered the salvation of his people absolutely certain; that the reason why some are saved and others are not, is not the foresight of their faith and repentance, but solely because he has elected some and not others, and that in execution of his purpose, in his own good time, he sends them the Holy Spirit, who so operates on men as to render their repentance, faith, and holy living absolutely certain. Now it is plain that men may differ as to the mode of God's providential government, or the operations of his grace, and retain the facts which constitute the essence of this doctrinal scheme. But if any one teaches that God cannot effectually control the acts of free agents without destroying their liberty; that he cannot render the repentance or faith of any man certain; that he does all he can to convert every man, it would be an insult to reason and conscience, to say that he held the system of doctrine which embraces the facts and principles above stated.

The Second View: The Doctrines of the "System" Enumerated

The same strain of remark might be made in reference to the other great doctrines which constitute the Augustinian system. Enough, however, has been said to illustrate the principle of interpretation for which Old-school men contend. We do not expect that our ministers should adopt every proposition contained in our standards. This they are not required to do. But they are required to adopt the system; and that system consists of certain doctrines, no one of which can be omitted without destroying its identity. Those doctrines are, the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and the consequent infallibility of all their teachings; the doctrine of the Trinity, that there is one God subsisting in three persons, the Father, Son, and Spirit, the same in substance and equal in power and glory; the doctrine of decrees and predestination as above stated; the doctrine of creation, viz., that the universe and all that it contains is not eternal, is not a necessary product of the life of God, is not an emanation from the divine substance, but owes its existence as to substance and form solely to his will: and in reference to man, that he was created in the image of God, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, and not *in puris naturalibus*, without any moral character; the doctrine of providence, or that God effectually governs all his creatures and all their actions, so that nothing comes to pass which is not in accordance with his infinitely wise, holy, and benevolent purposes;—the doctrine of the covenants: the first, or covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience, and the second, or covenant of grace, wherein God freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all who are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe;—the doctrine concerning Christ our Mediator, ordained of God to be our prophet, priest, and king, the head and Saviour of his Church, the heir of all things and judge of the world, unto whom he did, from eternity, give a people to be his seed, to be by him

in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified, and that the eternal Son of God, of one substance with the Father, took upon him man's nature, so that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and

The Life of Praise

By THOMAS L. HODGE

WHOSO OFFERETH PRAISE GLORIFIETH ME, AND TO HIM WHO ORDERETH HIS CONVERSATION ARIGHT WILL I SHEW THE SALVATION OF GOD. PS. 50: 23.

In the old hymn prayer is said to be the Christian's vital breath. Praise is no less so. Prayer without praise is all asking—hardly well-pleasing to our Heavenly Father who has given us all.

If you are in trouble, praise your loving Father who has provided a way out of all our difficulties. If laden with a sense of sin, give hearty thanks to Him who hath provided a substitute for us, One who bore our sins in His own body on the tree. If you are in need of any kind, praise Him who assures us in His Word that my God shall supply all your needs through His riches in grace through Christ Jesus.

When we contemplate all that has been done for us—that we have been adopted into the family of God as sons, and made joint-heirs with Jesus Christ; that the guilt of our sins has been nailed to the cross and will never be brought against us; that nothing can harm us without the consent of our Heavenly Father, but rather all things work together for good to them that love God; that this life, so short, is but a preparation for an eternity to be spent in His presence, when we shall be like our Lord—how can we keep from praising Him who has done all this for us?

The life of praise is one well-pleasing to God. The life of praise is a life of joy. The life of praise is a life of safety: for when the soul is occupied with praise to its Lord and Redeemer, Satan cannot reach it.

the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion; that this Lord Jesus Christ by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven for all those whom the Father hath given to him;—the doctrine of free will, viz.: that man was created not only a free agent, but with full ability to choose good or evil, and by that choice determine his future character and destiny; that by the fall he has lost this ability to spiritual good; that in conversion God by his Spirit enables the sinner freely to repent and believe;—the doctrine of effectual calling, or regeneration, that those, and those only whom God has predestinated unto life, he effectually calls by his word and Spirit, from a state of spiritual death to a state of spiritual life, renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining their wills, thus effectually drawing them to Christ; yet so that they come most freely;—and that this effectual calling is of God's free and special grace alone, not from any thing foreseen in man; the doctrine of justification, that it is a free act, or act of grace on the part of God; that it does not consist in any subjective change of state, nor simply in pardon, but includes a declaring and accepting the sinner as righteous; that it is founded not on anything wrought in us or done by us; not on faith or evangelical obedience, but simply on what Christ has done for us, i.e., in his obedience and sufferings unto death; this righteousness of Christ being a proper, real and full satisfaction to the justice of God, his exact justice and rich grace are glorified in the justification of sinners;—the doctrine of adoption, that those who are justified are received into the family of God, and made partakers of the spirit and privileges of his children;—the doctrine of sanctification, that those once regenerated by the Spirit of God are, by his power and indwelling, in the use of the appointed means of grace, rendered more and more holy, which work, although always imperfect in this life, is perfected at death;—the doctrine of saving faith, that it is the gift of God, and work of the Holy Spirit, by which the Christian re-

ceives as true, on the authority of God, whatever is revealed in his word, the special acts of which faith are the receiving and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life;—the doctrine of repentance, that the sinner out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but of the odiousness of sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does with grief and hatred of his own sins, turn from them unto God, with full purpose and endeavor after new obedience;—the doctrine of good works, that they are such only as God has commanded; that they are the fruits of faith; such works, although not necessary as the ground of our justification, are indispensable, in the case of adults, as the uniform products of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers;—the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, that those once effectually called and sanctified by the Spirit, can never totally or finally fall from a state of grace, because the decree of election is immutable, because Christ's merit is infinite, and His intercession constant; because the Spirit abides with the people of God; and because the covenant of grace secures the salvation of all who believe;—the doctrine of assurance; that the assurance of salvation is desirable, possible, and obligatory, but is not of the essence of faith;—the doctrine of the law, that it is a revelation of the will of God, and a perfect rule of righteousness; that it is perpetually obligatory on justified persons as well as others, although believers are not under it as a covenant of works;—the doctrine of Christian liberty, that it includes freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemnation of the law, from a legal spirit, from the bondage of Satan and dominion of sin, from the world and ultimately from all evil, together with free access to God as his children; since the advent of Christ, his people are freed also from the yoke of the ceremonial law; God alone is the Lord of the conscience, which he has set free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.

Doctrines Not Peculiar to the System

The doctrines concerning worship and the Sabbath, concerning vows and

oaths, or the civil magistrate, of marriage, contain nothing peculiar to our system, or which is matter of controversy among Presbyterians. The same is true as to what the Confession teaches concerning the Church, of the communion of saints, of the sacraments, and of the future state, and of the resurrection of the dead, and of the final judgment.

That such is the system of doctrine of the Reformed Church is a matter of history. It is the system which, as the granite formation of the earth, underlies and sustains the whole scheme of truth as revealed in the Scriptures, and without which all the rest is as drifting sand. It has been from the beginning the life and soul of the Church, taught explicitly by our Lord himself, and more fully by his inspired servants, and always professed by a cloud of witnesses in the Church. It has moreover ever been the esoteric faith of true believers, adopted in their prayers and hymns, even when rejected from their creeds. It is this system which the Presbyterian Church is pledged to profess, to defend, and to teach; and it is a breach of faith to God and man if she fails to require a profession of this system by all those whom she receives or ordains as teachers and guides of her people. It is for the adoption of the Confession of Faith in this sense that the Old-school have always contended as a matter of conscience.

The Third View: "Substance of Doctrine"

There has, however, always been a party in the Church which adopted the third method of understanding the words "system of doctrine," in the ordination service, viz., that they mean nothing more than the essential doctrines of religion or of Christianity. . . .

It is said by some, that in adopting the "system of doctrine," the candidate is understood to adopt it, not in the form or manner in which it is presented in the Confession, but only for "substance of doctrine." The obvious objections to this view of the subject are:

That such is not the meaning of the words employed. The two expressions or declarations, "I adopt the system of doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith," and, "I adopt that system for substance of doctrine," are not identical. The one therefore can-

not be substituted for the other. If there were no other difference between them, it is enough that the one is definite and univocal, the other is both vague and equivocal. The latter expression may have two very different meanings. By substance of doctrine may be meant the substantial doctrines of the Confession, that is, those doctrines which give character to it as a distinctive confession of faith, and which therefore constitute the system of belief therein contained. Or it may mean the substance of the several doctrines taught in the Confession, as distinguished from the form in which they are therein presented. It will be at once perceived that these are very different things. The substance or essence of a system of doctrines is the system itself. In this case, the essence of a thing is the whole thing. The essential doctrines of Pelagianism are Pelagianism, and the essential doctrines of Calvinism are Calvinism. But the substance of a doctrine is not the doctrine, any more than the substance of a man is the man. A man is a given substance in a specific form; and a doctrine is a given truth in a particular form. The substantial truth, included in the doctrine of original sin, is that human nature is deteriorated by the apostasy of Adam. The different forms in which this general truth is presented, make all the difference, as to this point, between Pelagianism, Augustinianism, Romanism, and Arminianism. It is impossible, therefore, in matters of doctrine, to separate the substance from the form. The form is essential to the doctrine, as much as the form of a statue is essential to the statue. In adopting a system of doctrines, therefore, the candidate adopts a series of doctrines in the specific form in which they are presented in that system. To say that he adopts the substance of those doctrines, leaves it entirely uncertain what he adopts. The first objection then to this view of the meaning of the phrase, "system of doctrine," is, that it is contrary to the simple historical sense of the terms. What a man professes to adopt is, "the system of doctrine," not the substance of the doctrines embraced in that system.

Another objection is, that it is contrary to the mind of the Church. The Church, in demanding the adoption of the Confession of Faith as con-

taining the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, demands something more than the adoption of what the candidate may choose to consider the substance of those doctrines. This is plain from the words used, which, as we have seen, in their plain import, mean something more, and something more specific and intelligible than the phrase "substance of doctrine" . . .

Vagueness of "Substance"

Not only are the plain meanings of the words, and the *animus imponentis* opposed to the interpretation of the ordination service now under consideration, but that interpretation is liable to the further objection, that the phrase, "substance of doctrine," has no definite assignable meaning. What the substance of any given doctrine is cannot be historically ascertained or authenticated. No one knows what a man professes, who professes to receive only the substance of a doctrine, and, therefore, this mode of subscription vitiates the whole intent and value of a confession. Who can tell what is the substance of the doctrine of sin? Does the substance include all the forms under which the doctrine has been, or can be held, so that whoever holds any one of those forms holds the substance of the doctrine? If one man says that nothing is sin but the voluntary transgression of known law; another, that men are responsible only for their purposes to the exclusion of their feelings; another, that an act to be voluntary, and therefore sinful, must be deliberate and not impulsive; another, that sin is merely limitation or imperfect development; another, that sin exists only for us and in our consciousness, and not in the sight of God; another, that sin is any want of conformity in state, feeling, or act, to the law of God; do all these hold the substance of the doctrine? What is the substance of the doctrine of redemption? The generic idea of redemption, in the Christian sense of the word, may be said to be the deliverance of men from sin and its consequences by Jesus Christ. Does every man who admits that idea hold the substance of the doctrine as presented in our Confession? If so, then it matters not whether we believe that that deliverance is effected by the example of Christ, or by his doctrine, or by his power, or by the moral impression of

his death on the race or the universe, or by his satisfying the justice of God, or by his incarnation exalting our nature to a higher power. The same remark may be made in reference to all the other distinctive doctrines of the Confession. The general idea of "grace" is that of a remedial divine influence; but is that influence exercised only by ordering our external circumstances? or is it simply the moral influence of the truth which God has revealed? or that influence exalted by some special operation? is it *praeveniens* as well as assisting? is it common without being sufficient, or sufficient as well as common? is it irresistible, or efficacious only through its congruity or the co-operation of the sinner. Does the man who holds any one of these forms, hold the substance of the doctrine of grace? It is perfectly obvious that there is no authoritative standard by which to determine what the substance of a doctrine is; that the very idea of a doctrine is a truth in a specific form, and, therefore, those who do not hold the doctrines of the Confession in the form in which they are therein presented, do not hold the doctrines. It is equally obvious, that no definite, intelligible, trustworthy profession of faith is made by the man who simply professes to hold the substance of certain doctrines. Such a mode of adopting the Confession of Faith is morally wrong, because inconsistent with the plain meaning of the words, and with the mind of the Church, and because it renders the adoption nugatory.

This system has been tried, and found to produce the greatest disorder and contention. Men acting on the principle of receiving the Confession for substance of doctrine, have entered the ministry in our Church, who denied the doctrine of imputation, whether of Adam's sin or of Christ's righteousness; the doctrine of the derivation of a sinful depravity of nature from our first parents; of inability; of efficacious grace; of a definite atonement; that is, of an atonement having any such special reference to the elect, as to render their salvation certain. In short, while professing to receive "the system of doctrine" contained in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms they have rejected almost every doctrine which gives that system its distinctive character.

COLUMBUS CHURCH WITHDRAWS BY UNANIMOUS ACTION

Members Refuse Resignation of the Rev. Leslie A. Dunn

BY UNANIMOUS action the Columbus (N. J.) Presbyterian Church has severed all connections with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., and formed an independent local church. The congregation first refused to accept the resignation of its pastor, the Rev. Leslie A. Dunn, and then voted to stand with him in renouncing the jurisdiction of the local presbytery.

"To say that the Columbus Presbyterian Church is departing from Presbyterianism," said Mr. Dunn, "is far from being true. The reasons for its recent actions do not lie only in an immediate cause, but from the fact that the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. has for many years been departing from the truth."

Commenting on the action of his congregation, Mr. Dunn said: "With no Presbyterian College true to the Bible to which our young people can go, no summer conference in our denomination where we can feel they will not imbibe false teachings, the literature of the church too questionable and vague for use in Sunday School and Christian Endeavor, forbidden to support the missionary enterprises of our choosing and a conscience that would not permit support of the Modernism in the official Board and, finally, with ministers obtained not from officially recognized seminaries, this church felt like an orphan that did not belong in its environment and was not wanted. So, when the pastor resigned, the people refused to accept his resignation by a unanimous vote. Then they proceeded to withdraw from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., also by a unanimous vote. A relieved and unified happy spirit has pervaded the community since this action was taken, and many are in earnest prayer for a Holy Ghost revival in Columbus."

Mr. Dunn, on July 28th, applied for admission and was received into the Philadelphia Presbytery of The Presbyterian Church of America.