

CREED SUBSCRIPTION IN
THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE U.S.A.

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EDITORIAL PREFACE

John Murray, former professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia), presented this undated essay as an historical study of creedal subscription in the North American denomination known as the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Sometime after the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was formed (11 June 1936), Professor Murray sought to assist that young denomination in answering questions surrounding subscription, questions that arose early in her history.

Murray argues persuasively that the original adopting act and subsequent creedal subscription among Presbyterians in North America involved a subscription *to the creed or confession itself*, as containing the "system of doctrine" taught in the Holy Scripture. Although Murray insisted upon subscription to the Confession of Faith *per se*, and to the Confession as containing the "system of doctrine(s)" taught in Holy Scripture, he resisted the notion of subscription to every proposition in the Confession, due both to the extensiveness of the document and to the danger of placing the Confession on a par with Scripture.

In our judgment, Murray's understanding of creedal subscription is virtually indistinguishable from the classic continental Reformed understanding of creedal subscription. If any difference exists, it would be between a subscription to "all the articles and points of doctrine" (recognizing that their formulation is not perfect) and a subscription to the confessions, though not to all the *dicta* or propositions (i.e., the way the doctrines are stated).

Our objectives in publishing this helpful essay are to help remove a possible misunderstanding concerning alleged differences pertaining to creedal subscription among Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, and thereby to foster ecumenical discussion among Presbyterian and Reformed readers about creedal subscription.

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The question with which we are concerned in this study is the history and import of Question 2 in the formula of subscription required of elders and deacons on their being ordained to office, of candidates for licensure on their being licensed, and of ministers on their ordination to the office of the ministry. The Question concerned reads as follows: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures?"

Historically speaking, the action of the Synod of Philadelphia on September 19, 1729, known as "The Adopting Act," is of basic significance. After long debate an overture brought in by a committee was agreed upon in these terms.

Although the Synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men's consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with, and abhorrence of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the Church, being willing to receive one another as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances, all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the kingdom of heaven, yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity; and do therefore agree that all the ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in, and approbation of, the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith. And we do all agree, that all the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate of the ministry into the exercise of the sacred functions but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession, either by subscribing the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms, or by a verbal declaration of their assent thereto, as such minister or candidate shall think best. And in case any minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of

his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government. But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable of communion with them. And the Synod do solemnly agree, that none of us will traduce or use any opprobrious terms of those that differ from us in these extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrine, but treat them with the same friendship, kindness, and brotherly love, as if they had not differed from us in such sentiments.¹

There are four considerations respecting this act that are to be particularly noted. (1) The Larger and Shorter Catechisms as well as the Confession of Faith of the Westminster Assembly of divines are included in the documents with which the Synod was concerned. (2) Ministers on being admitted in the Synod were required to agree to and approve of these documents "as being in *all the essential and necessary articles*, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine" (italics mine). (3) The minister adopted the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of his faith. (4) A minister or candidate for the ministry was at liberty to express any scruple he might entertain respecting any article or articles of the Confession or Catechisms and was nevertheless to be admitted if the Synod or Presbytery judged the scruple or mistake to be only about "*articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government*" (italics mine).

It should be apparent, therefore, that the subscription or declaration was not intended to commit the candidate or minister to every particular statement or form of statement in the Confession and Catechism. He was at liberty to diverge or disagree provided these divergences did not affect "essential and necessary articles." And if the candidate or minister gave utterance to scruples it was the prerogative of the Synod or Presbytery to judge whether or not the scruples impinged upon essential and necessary articles. It is, therefore, in terms of this liberty with respect to articles not essential and necessary that

¹Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, (Philadelphia, 1904), 94 (hereafter cited as *Records*).

"adoption" of the Confession and Catechisms is to be understood. Subscription did not involve agreement with every *dictum* of these documents. It is necessary, however, to guard against misinterpretation of this liberty. The adoption did mean the acceptance of the *dicta* of the Confession and Catechisms in all the essential and necessary articles — in these articles they were agreed to and approved as "good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine." Hence it was not simply the system of doctrine that was adopted but the Confession and Catechisms themselves, with the proviso already stated respecting all essential and necessary articles.

Although it would be no wonder should difficulty arise in the course of time, as actually came to be the case, respecting this distinction between essential and necessary articles and those not essential and necessary. If the foregoing action were the definitive and final action of the Synod, it would be reasonable and understandable, especially when we bear in mind that there were some in the Synod who were not hospitable to the adoption of any humanly framed creed. The above action was a *via media* whereby the proponents of rigid subscription gained the principle of subscription to Reformed Standards and the others preserved a measure of liberty in respect of articles not essential and necessary. But the matter becomes much more complicated by reason of subsequent actions of the Synod.

On the afternoon of the same day we have the following minute of action taken:

All the ministers of this Synod now present except one, who declared himself not prepared, viz.: Masters. Jedediah Andrews, Thomas Craighead, John Thompson, James Anderson, John Pierson, Samuel Gelston, Joseph Houston, Gilbert Tennent, Adam Boyd, Jonathan Dickinson, John Bradner, Alexander Hucheson, Thomas Evans, Hugh Stevenson, William Tennent, Hugh Conn, George Gillespie, and John Wilson; after proposing all the scruples that any of them had to make against any articles and expressions in the Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and in declaring the said Confession and Catechisms to be the confession of their faith, excepting only some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, concerning which clauses the Synod do unanimously declare that they do not receive those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil

magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods, with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority, or power to persecute any for their religion, or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain. The Synod observing that unanimity, peace, and unity which appeared in all their consultations and determinations in the affairs of the Confession, did unanimously agree in giving thanks to God in solemn prayer and praise.²

There are a few things to be noted about this action. (1) As will appear from the action of Synods later on, it is this latter action, on the afternoon of September 19, 1729, that the Synod construed as the "Adopting Act." The overture agreed upon in the forenoon is spoken of as "the first or preliminary act of our Synod."³ This raises the suspicion that the overture agreed upon in the forenoon was not definitive or final and cannot, therefore, be relied on as the act defining the actual subscription or its intent. (2) This action on the afternoon of September 19th means that all scruples respecting the Confession and Catechisms had been unanimously resolved so that all, except the one mentioned, could adopt the same in all their articles except some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters of the Confession respecting the civil magistrate. These clauses were therefore the only examples in the category of articles not essential and necessary with respect to which reservation was made. (3) Even these clauses were not rejected as erroneous. It is simply stated that they did not receive these articles in a certain sense. This could well be regarded as guarding against erroneous or unnecessary interpretations and applications of those articles contrary to their original intent and purport. (4) This action of the Synod would have to be regarded as acceptance of the Confession and Catechisms in their entirety without any reservation except that concerned with the civil magistrate, as noted.

In 1730, there is only one reference to this question. It is to the effect that Mr. David Evans "having proposed all the scruples he had to make about any articles of the Confession and Catechisms, *etc.*, to the satisfaction of the Synod, and declared his adopting the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, agreeable to the last year's Adopting Act; he was unanimously received in as a member again; and

²*Records*, 94f.

³*Records*, 126.

for his ease is joined to the Presbytery of Philadelphia.⁴

As we might have anticipated, the preliminary act of 1729 provoked questions in the minds of many persons regarding the distinction made in the said act between essential and necessary articles and those not essential and necessary. The Synod of Philadelphia felt called upon to take account of the agitation that had arisen on this question and so the following declaration was approved at the meeting in September 1736:

An overture of the committee upon the supplication of the people of Paxton and Derry, was brought in and is as followeth. That the Synod do declare, that inasmuch as we understand that many persons of our persuasion, both more lately and formerly, have been offended with some expressions of distinctions in the first or preliminary act of our Synod, contained in the printed paper, relating to our receiving or adopting the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, &c.; That in order to remove said offence, and all jealousies that have arisen or may arise in any of our people's minds, on occasion of said distinctions and expressions, the Synod doth declare, that the Synod have adopted and still do adhere to the Westminster Confession, Catechisms, and Directory, without the least variation or alteration, and without any regard to said distinctions. And we do further declare, that this was our meaning and true intent in our first adopting of said Confession, as may particularly appear by our Adopting Act which is as followeth:

All the ministers of this Synod now present except one, who declared himself not prepared, viz.: Masters. Jedediah Andrews, Thomas Craighead, John Thompson, James Anderson, John Pierson, Samuel Gelston, Joseph Houston, Gilbert Tennent, Adam Boyd, Jonathan Dickinson, John Bradner, Alexander Hucheson, Thomas Evans, Hugh Stevenson, William Tennent, Hugh Conn, George Gillespie, and John Wilson; after proposing all the scruples that any of them had to make against any articles and expressions in the Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and in declaring the said Confession and Catechisms to be the confession of their faith, excepting only some clauses

⁴Records, 97f.

in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, concerning which clauses the Synod do unanimously declare that they do not receive those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods, with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority, or power to persecute any for their religion, or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain.

And we hope and desire, that this our Synodical declaration and explication may satisfy all our people, as to our firm attachment to our good old received doctrines contained in said confession, without the least variation or alteration, and that they will lay aside their jealousies that have been entertained through occasion of the above hinted expressions and declarations as groundless.⁵

This act makes clear that the Synod regarded the action of the *afternoon* on September 19, 1729 as the "Adopting Act" and the action of the forenoon as merely preliminary. Of greatest significance is the declaration that "the Synod have adopted and still do adhere to the Westminster Confession, Catechisms and Directory, without the least variation or alteration, and without any regard to said distinctions." This would appear to mean that the said documents were adopted in their entirety without the distinction between essential and necessary articles, on the one hand, and those not essential and necessary, on the other. It may be that there is some relaxation of this apparent rigidity in the terms which appear later in the same declaration, namely, "our firm attachment to our good old received *doctrines* [italics mine] contained in said confession, without the least variation or alteration." That is to say, it is the adherence to the doctrines without variation or alteration and not necessarily to every expression and proposition of these documents. It is rather strange, furthermore, that the declarations of adherence in this case includes the Directory. The earlier acts did not make mention of the Directory and subsequent acts discriminated between the kind of adherence pledged to the Directory and that to the Confession and Catechisms.

Dr. Hodge renders the following judgment with respect to the intent of these actions of the Synod.

⁵Records, 126f.

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 in chapters twentieth and twenty-third.⁶

Referring to the action of 1736 he continues:

There is no inconsistency between this declaration and those of 1729. This is, indeed, in some respects more explicit, but is not more comprehensive. The Synod adopted no more of the Confession in 1736, than they did in 1729. It is to be remarked that they call the overture adopted on the morning of September 19th, the preliminary act about adopting the Confession of Faith, and the minute of the afternoon of that day, their Adopting Act itself. In the former they determined that all their members shall declare first, "agreement with the Confession, &c., in all the essential and necessary articles"; and secondly, that they "adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of their faith." When as they came to carry this resolution into effect, they did actually adopt the whole of the Confession and Catechisms, "excepting only" the specified clauses in chapters twentieth and twenty-third. The act of 1736 does the same and no more. The preliminary act merely declared the purpose of the Synod to exact the adoption of the Confession in all its essential and necessary articles; the Synod not then knowing what exceptions they might choose to make, but subsequently they made no exceptions beyond what has just been stated. This, however, was not generally known to the churches, and hence the anxiety to ascertain what the Synod received and or what they rejected. To satisfy this anxiety, the Synod tell the churches what they had done; that they had adopted the whole of the Confession, rejecting no part of it, but simply repudiating a certain specified interpretation of a few clauses. As far as our doctrinal standards, therefore, are concerned, this declaration of 1736 is nothing more than an announcement and repetition in full of what the Synod had

⁶Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1851), 155f (hereafter cited as *Constitutional History*).

done in 1729, by piecemeal, partly in the morning and partly in the afternoon.⁷

Hodge's quotation from the Rev. Samuel Blair is to the same effect and reads as follows:

There never was any scruple, that ever I heard of, made by any member of the Synod about any part of the Confession of Faith, but only about some particular clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, and those clauses were excepted against in the Synod's act receiving the Confession of Faith, only in such a sense, which, for my part, I believe the reverend composers never intended in them, but which might notwithstanding be readily put upon them. Mr. Creaghead, to prove what he supposes, dwells much on what is called the Synod's preliminary act about the Confession of faith made in 1729. But let that act be thought as insufficient as it can possibly admit, and granting that it was not sufficient for the securing of a sound orthodox ministry; yet that is no argument but the Confession of Faith has been sufficiently received by other acts. And so in fact it has been, by the Synod's act for the purpose, I think in the year 1730 [1729], wherein the Synod declares, "all the ministers of the Synod now present, &c. &c."⁸

It is to be remembered that a schism took place in the Synod of Philadelphia in 1741 by the exclusion of the Presbytery of New Brunswick which was joined later (1745) by the Presbyteries of New York and New Castle to form the Synod of New York. This schism was healed in 1758. In 1756, the Synod of Philadelphia, in answer to overtures from the Synod of New York, declared: "We desire to unite on the same terms, on which the members of both Synods were united when one body."⁹

The Synod of New York when it was formed in 1745 by the union of the three Presbyteries aforementioned, agreed *inter alia* on the following plan and foundation of their synodical union.

1. They agree that the Westminster Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, be the public

⁷Hodge, *Constitutional History*, 158.

⁸Hodge, *Constitutional History*, 166f.

⁹*Records*, 223.

confession of their faith in such manner as agreed unto by the Synod of Philadelphia, in the year 1729; and to be inserted in the latter end of this book. And they declare their approbation of the Directory of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as the general plan of worship and discipline.¹⁰

In 1751, the Synod of New York declared as follows:

The Synod being informed of certain misrepresentations concerning the constitution, order and discipline of our churches, industriously spread by some of the members of the Dutch congregations, interspersed among or bordering upon us, with design to prevent occasional or constant communion of their members with our churches; to obviate all such misrepresentations, and to cultivate a good understanding between us and our brethren of the Dutch churches, we do hereby declare and testify our constitution, order, and discipline, to be in harmony with the established church of Scotland. The Westminster Confession, Catechisms, and Directory for public worship and church government adopted by them, are in like manner received and adopted by us. We declare ourselves united with that church in the same faith, order and discipline.¹¹

The Synods of Philadelphia and New York, a plan of union having been considered and approved by both Synods previously and separately, came together on May 29, 1758. It was declared in this joint meeting that "both Synods continue to profess the same principles of faith, and adhere to the same form of worship, government, and discipline,"¹² and the plan on the basis of which they united in one body under the name of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia provided *inter alia* as follows:

- I. Both Synods having always approved and received the Westminster Confession of Faith, and Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as an orthodox and excellent system of Christian doctrine, founded on the word of God, we do still receive the same as the confession of

¹⁰Records, 233.

¹¹Records, 245.

¹²Records, 286.

our faith, and also adhere to the plan of worship, government, and discipline, contained in the Westminster Directory, strictly enjoining it on all our members and probationers for the ministry, that they preach and teach according to the form of sound words in said Confession and Catechisms, and avoid and oppose all errors contrary thereto. . . .

- VI. That no Presbytery shall license or ordain to the work of the ministry, any candidate until he . . . declare his acceptance of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as the confession of his faith, and promise subjection to the Presbyterian plan of government in the Westminster Directory.¹³

There emerges here for the first time, as far as I have been able to discover in the actions of the respective Synods, this form of words respecting adoption of the Confession and Catechisms, namely, "approved and received the Westminster Confession of Faith, and Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as an orthodox and excellent system of Christian doctrine founded on the word of God," not forgetting, of course, that in the preliminary act of 1729 we find the words, "good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine" with reference to "all the essential and necessary articles" of these creedal documents. The emergence of their expression "system of Christian doctrine" is no doubt the origin, officially at least, of the expression "system of doctrine" which occupies so important a place in Question 2 of the formula later adopted.

It is also of interest that, in connection with a convention consisting of committees from the Synod, from the Low Dutch Reformed Synod of New York and New Jersey, and from the Associate Reformed Synod, meeting at New York in 1785, a representation of the committee of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia reads as follows:

The Synod of New York and Philadelphia adopt, according to the known and established meaning of the terms, the Westminster Confession of Faith as the confession of their faith, save that every candidate for the gospel ministry is permitted to except so much of the twenty-third chapter as gives authority to the civil magistrate in matters of religion. . . . The Synod also

¹³*Records, 286f.*

receives the directory for public worship and the form of church government recommended by the Westminster Assembly as in substance agreeable to the institutions of the New Testament.¹⁴

It was the Synod of 1787 that first undertook revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The records read as follows:

The Synod took into consideration the last paragraph of the twentieth chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith; the third paragraph of the twenty-third chapter; and the first paragraph of the thirty-first chapter; and having made some alterations, agreed that the said paragraphs, as now altered, be printed for consideration, together with the draught of a plan of government and discipline. The Synod also appointed the above named committee to revise the Westminster Directory for public worship, and to have it when thus revised, printed, together with the draught, for consideration. And the Synod agreed, that when the above proposed alterations in the Confession of Faith shall have been finally determined on by the body, and the Directory shall have been revised as above directory, and adopted by the Synod, the said Confession thus altered, and Directory thus revised and adopted, shall be styled, "The Confession of Faith, and Directory for public worship, of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America."¹⁵

On May 28, 1788, the amendments to the Confession of Faith were adopted and the form of government and discipline was also ratified and adopted.

The Synod having fully considered the draught of the form of government and discipline, did, on a review of the whole, and hereby do ratify and adopt the same, as now altered and amended, as the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America, and order the same to be considered and strictly observed as the rule of their proceedings, by all the inferior judicatories belonging to the body. And they order that a correct copy be printed, and that the Westminster Confession of Faith,

¹⁴*Records*, 518f.

¹⁵*Records*, 539f.

as now altered, be printed in full along with it, as making a part of the constitution.

Resolved, That the true intent and meaning of the above ratification by the Synod, is, that the Form of Government and Discipline and the Confession of Faith, as now ratified, is to continue to be our constitution and the confession of our faith and practice unalterable, unless two thirds of the Presbyteries under the care of the General Assembly shall propose alterations or amendments, and such alterations or amendments shall be agreed to and enacted by the General Assembly.¹⁶

The day following, action was taken respecting the directory and the two Catechisms.

The Synod having now revised the draft of a directory for worship, did approve and ratify the same, and do hereby appoint the said directory, as now amended, to be the directory for the worship of God in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. They also took into consideration the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, and having made a small amendment of the larger, did approve, and do hereby approve and ratify the said Catechisms, as now agreed on, as the Catechisms of the Presbyterian Church in the said United States. And the Synod order, that the said Directory and Catechisms be printed and bound up in the same volume with the Confession of Faith and the Form of Government and Discipline, and that the whole be considered as the standard of our doctrine, government, discipline and worship, agreeably to the resolutions of the Synod at their present sessions.¹⁷

It was at this meeting that the Synod was divided into four Synods — the Synod of New York and New Jersey, the Synod of Philadelphia, the Synod of Virginia, and the Synod of the Carolinas — a division which took effect with the dissolution of the Synod of 1788. Before dissolution, it was provided that the first meeting of the General Assembly, constituted out of the four Synods, meet in May 1789 in the Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

¹⁶*Records*, 546.

¹⁷*Records*, 547.

Question 2 of the formula of subscription for elders and deacons, licentiates and ministers in the form, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt, the confession of faith of this church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures?" was adopted by the Synod of New York and Philadelphia in 1788 in the action referred to above when the form of government and discipline was adopted.¹⁸

Actions of subsequent General Assemblies are of interest. In 1824, the report of a committee, to which was referred a petition from certain members in Tammany Street congregation in Baltimore, was adopted by the Assembly and reads in part as follows:

1. That, in the opinion of the Assembly, Confessions of Faith, containing formulas of doctrine, and rules for conducting the discipline and worship proper to be maintained in the house of God, are not only recognized as necessary and expedient, but as the character of human nature is continually aiming at innovation, absolutely requisite to the settled peace of the church, and to the and to the happy and orderly existence of Christian communion. . . .
2. That though the Confession of Faith, and the standards of our church, are of no original authority, independent of the Scriptures, yet we regard them as a summary of those divine truths which are diffused throughout the sacred volume. They, as a system of doctrines, therefore, cannot be abandoned in our opinion, without an abandonment of the word of God. . . .
3. This Confession of Faith, adopted by our church, contains a system of doctrines professedly believed by the people and the pastors under the care of the General Assembly, nor can it be traduced by any in the communion of our church, without subjecting the erring parties to that salutary discipline, which hath for its object the maintenance of the peace and purity

¹⁸Cf. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church*, I:371, 396, 400, 408.

of the church, under the government of her great Master.¹⁹

Likewise in 1825, the report of a "committee appointed on an overture respecting the consistency of admitting into this church ministers who manifest a decided hostility to ecclesiastical creeds, confessions and formularies" was adopted and is as follows:

1. That the Constitution, as is well known, expressly requires of all candidates for admission, a strong solemn declaration that they sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures.
2. That the last Assembly . . . have so explicitly and fully declared the sentiments of this church in regard to her ecclesiastical standards, and all within her communion who traduce them, that on further expression of our views on this subject is deemed necessary.²⁰

In 1830, the Assembly adopted a report by a committee which provided that ministers and licentiates coming from other ecclesiastical bodies would be required to answer in the affirmative the constitutional questions of the relevant chapters of the Form of Government.

In 1832, in answer to the question whether the Larger and Shorter Catechisms are comprehended in the words "Confession of Faith of this Church," the Assembly replied in the affirmative and quoted the appropriate actions of the Synods in support of this judgment. It was resolved that

in receiving and adopting the Confession of Faith as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly of Divines are included, and do constituted an integral part of the standards of this Church.²¹

¹⁹*Minutes of the General Assembly . . . from A.D. 1821 to A.D. 1835 inclusive*, (Philadelphia, n.d.), 114.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 155.

²¹*Ibid.*, 372.

It is interesting that the Assembly referred to the act of the Synod of 1788, quoted above, as "the Adopting Act of the Confessions" and this fact constitutes additional evidence that in 1788, Question 2 of the formula of subscription was formally adopted.

In 1835, the Assembly declared that the holding of certain opinions, not distinguishable from Pelagian or Arminian errors, is "wholly incompatible with an honest adoption of our Confession of Faith" and "enjoined upon all Presbyteries and Synods to exercise the utmost vigilance in guarding against the introduction and publication of such pestiferous errors."²²

In 1837, division took place in the Presbyterian Church. Until the reunion in 1869 there were two Assemblies, the Old School and the New School. As the basis of reunion in 1869, the following declaration was adopted by both Assemblies:

This Assembly having received and examined the statement of the votes of the several Presbyteries on the Basis of the Reunion of the two bodies now claiming the name and the right of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, which basis is in the words following, namely: "The Union shall be effected on the doctrinal and ecclesiastical basis of our common Standards; the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments shall be acknowledged to be the inspired Word of God, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice; the Confession of Faith shall continue to be sincerely received and adopted as containing the system of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures; and the Government and Discipline of the Presbyterian Church in the United States shall be approved as containing the principles and rules of our polity:" Does hereby find and declare that said Basis of Union has been approved by more than two-thirds of the Presbyteries connected with this Branch of the Church and whereas the other Branch of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, now sitting in the Third (or, the First) Presbyterian Church in the city of Pittsburgh, has reported to this Assembly that said basis has been approved by more than two thirds of the Presbyteries connected with that Branch of the Church: Now therefore we do solemnly declare that said basis of Reunion is of binding force.²³

²²Ibid., 487.

²³*Digest of 1898* (Philadelphia, 1898), 40f.

It is well known that Charles Hodge, writing in *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* in 1858 on the "Adoption of the Confession of Faith,"²⁴ takes a very clear-cut position with respect to the intent and effect of the Question in the formula with which we are concerned. On the one hand, he rejects the view that it is the substance of doctrine that is being subscribed to and he supports his contention by the most ample evidence and irrefutable argumentation. On the other hand, he rejects the view that in receiving and adopting the Confession of Faith as containing the system of doctrine taught in The Holy Scriptures the subscriber professes to accept every proposition of the Confession and Catechisms. He pleads for the interpretation that in receiving the Confession of Faith as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, the subscriber does not profess acceptance of every proposition but only of that which belongs and is essential to the system of doctrine, the system of doctrine being demonstrated to be the reformed system as distinguished from every other, the system, in other words, which is embedded in and distinguishes three historic documents comprised in the Confession of the Presbyterian Church.

The position argued by Dr. Hodge is a thoroughly reasonable interpretation of the Question concerned. There can be, furthermore, little doubt but it is the understanding upon which generations of those subscribing have proceeded in adopting the formula of subscription. And there is much cogency in Dr. Hodge's argument that

to adopt a book as containing the system of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures, and to adopt every proposition contained in that book, are two very different things. The book, although a confession of faith, may contain many propositions by way of argument or inference, of which lie entirely outside the system, and which may be omitted, and yet leave the system in its integrity. The words "system of doctrine," have a definite meaning, and serve to define and limit the extent to which the Confession is adopted.²⁵

²⁴See Hodge, *The Church and its Polity* (London, 1879), 317-335.

²⁵Hodge, *The Church and its Polity*, 326.

He continues:

If the Church intended that the candidate should adopt every proposition contained in the Confession of Faith, why did she not say so? It was easy to express that idea. The words actually used do not, in their plain, established meaning, express it.²⁶

And, finally, this interpretation of the intent of the formula is the only one that most of us would be prepared to undertake in receiving and adopting the Confession or in requiring its adoption on the part of others. It seems to the present writer that to demand acceptance of every proposition in so extensive a series of documents would be incompatible with the avowal made in answer to the first question in the formula of subscription and comes dangerously close to the error of placing human documents on a par with holy Scripture. Furthermore, the commitment of oneself to every proposition as the condition of exercising office in the church is hardly consistent with the liberty of judgment on certain points of doctrine which has been characteristic of the Reformed Churches.

It is another question, however, whether the position taken by Dr. Hodge in the article concerned, a position adopted and acted upon for generations with the Presbyterian Churches adopting this same formula, is demonstrated to be valid and warranted in the light of the official declarations and actions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. In dealing with this question it is necessary to make certain observations on Dr. Hodge's own treatments of this question.

(1) It needs to be pointed out that Dr. Hodge is not accurate when he says that "it is one thing to adopt the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession."²⁷ This may be only an unfortunate form of statement. But it needs to be corrected because this form has been reproduced and reflects an erroneous construction of the formula in question. It is not simply the system of doctrine contained in the Confession that is adopted; the *Confession* is adopted as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture. In other words, the documents composed in the Confession are themselves received and adopted and it is impossible to suppress the significance of this adopted — it is that expression or setting forth of the system of doctrine that is received.

²⁶Hodge, *The Church and its Polity*, 327.

²⁷Hodge, *The Church and its Polity*, 326.

And it is also all-important to observe that the system of doctrine is not stated to be that contained in the Confession (thought this is true in itself and is implied); it is identified as the system of doctrine contained in the *Holy Scriptures*.

(2) Again, Dr. Hodge is not careful enough when he says that "the original Synod of Philadelphia officially declared that there were certain clauses in the Westminster Confession relating to the power of the civil magistrate in matters of religion, (*which they did not adopt*)" (italics mine).²⁸ It is to be remembered that the terms of "the Adopting Act" in 1729 were that these clauses were not received "in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority. . . ." This is but a reservation to the effect that in adopting the articles concerned, they were not to be understood as carrying a certain implication.

(3) It is difficult to reconcile the position taken by Dr. Hodge in 1839 in *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church* with the position taken twenty years later in 1858 in the articles cited and quoted from above. For in the former, as noted already, Dr. Hodge, in interpreting the Adopting Act of 1729 and particularly the confirmatory action of 1736, says: "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 in chapters twentieth and twenty-third" (159f.). And again in dealing with the action of 1736 and in reference to the anxiety aroused in the minds of many persons by the preliminary act of 1729 he says: "To satisfy this anxiety, the Synod tell the churches what they had done; that they had adopted the whole of the Confession, rejecting no part of it, but simply repudiating a certain specified interpretation of a few clauses" (158).

This latter apparent discrepancy in Dr. Hodge's own statements leads us to the real question in the interpretation of the intent of Question 2 in the formula of subscription. As has been argued above, the position taken by Dr. Hodge anent this Question in the formula adopted in 1788 is a reasonable interpretation of the intent, is also one understood and acted upon for generations, and is a fair construction of the precise terms of the Question concerned. But that it was the precise intent of the Synod of 1788 in its Adopting Act, is not demonstrably borne out by the relevant actions of the Synods from 1729

²⁸Hodge, *The Church and its Polity*, 327.

onwards. The preliminary act of 1729 did make the distinction between essential and necessary articles and those not such. But this "Adopting Act" of the same date does not make this distinction — all scruples had been resolved except those concerned with clauses pertaining to the civil magistrate specifically referred to in the Adopting Act. In 1736, as was observed above, the Synod, in order to remove jealousies that had arisen, declared that "the Synod have adopted and still do adhere to the Westminster Confession of Faith, Catechisms, and Directory, *without the least variation or alteration*, and without any regard to said distinctions" (italics mine) and then proceeded to quote the "Adopting Act" of 1729. Subsequent actions of the Synod or Synods do not furnish evidence that, in respect of the Confession and Catechisms, this interpretation of the intent and effect of the Adopting Act of 1729 had been modified or rescinded. As far as actions of Synods are concerned, the only evidence that could be pleaded in support of the view that Question 2 of the formula of subscription adopted in 1788 contemplated something different from that of the declaration of 1736, is that the form of words used in the Plan of Union of 1758, namely, "an orthodox and excellent system of Christian doctrine, founded on the word of God" and the precise terms used in Question 2 of the formula of 1788 must be understood, as Dr. Hodge maintains, as having a different purpose from that of subscription to every proposition of the Confession and Catechisms. The reason being, that the adoption of this form of words as distinct from the form used in the Adopting Act of 1729 constitutes evidence that the Synod had consciously and deliberately adopted a form which made an allowance for and in effect endorsed the distinctions made in the preliminary act of 1729.

But this must be an inference based on the exact terms of Question 2 and not on any clarifications or declarations to that effect on the part of the Synod or Synods or General Assemblies. The upshot of this survey of the history anent subscription to the Confession and Catechisms appears to be that the Presbyterian Church in the USA has never officially determined the precise intent and effect of Question 2 of the formula and that ambiguity still adheres to this Question. There need be no question but subscription involves commitment to the Reformed system of doctrine, to the avowal that this system is the system taught in the holy Scriptures, and to the Confession and Catechisms themselves as an exhibition of that system. That is to say, to the expression of that system as provided by these documents. But

the question as to whether more, by way of commitment and adoption, is involved, is one that the relevant actions of Synods and General Assemblies do not definitively determine.