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## SYSTEM SUBSCRIPTION

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### I. *Introduction*

Events in recent decades have reminded us of the value of confessional statements for safeguarding the teaching of the truth of Scripture. Whether we think of the very recent struggles within the Christian Reformed Church, those somewhat earlier in the Southern Baptist Convention, or still others, we see the importance not only of affirming the inerrancy of Scripture, but also of declaring corporately what we believe Scripture teaches.

Throughout church history, creeds, confessions, and catechisms have served this purpose. When officially adopted by the church, such documents become dogma, constituting the tradition of that church.<sup>1</sup> Such creeds, confessions, and catechisms are clearly secondary to Scripture, which is the only infallible rule of faith and practice, a point underscored in the *Westminster Confession* in its first chapter on Scripture, in its declaration that synods and councils of the church can err and many have erred, and in several other places.

While different denominations handle their confessional statements differently, the method of subscription of American Presbyterianism, if properly understood and practiced, is the best method of safeguarding and promoting the teaching of the church's doctrine. In this essay, I will defend the view that we should require that those who are ordained subscribe to the system of doctrine taught in confessional standards (system subscription) by taking a primarily historical approach. First, I will use as my point of departure the second ordination vow as it appears in the Presbyterian Church in America's (PCA's) *Book of Church Order* (roughly equivalent to the second vow in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church [OPC]). Second, I will clarify the methodology of system subscription by construing the Adopting Act of 1729 and referring to the first heresy trial in American Presbyterianism. Third, I will attempt to articulate a philosophical principle for following such a practice, which is essentially that of

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<sup>1</sup> We should not be afraid of this term. As Jaroslav Pelikan has said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead," as contrasted with traditionalism, which is the "dead faith of the living" (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–500)* [The Christian Tradition 1; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971], 9).

Charles Hodge and of the Old Princeton Seminary. Fourth, I will discuss certain contemporary exceptions that have been or are taken to the doctrinal standards. Finally, I will discuss the reunion of the Old Side and New Side (1758-1788) which provides us with a positive model for today.

## II. *The Ordination Vow*

The second ordination vow in the PCA's *Book of Church Order* reads as follows:

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; 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, in the case of ruling elders and deacons] the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow? (BCO, 21-5, 24-5.)

This vow raises several points. First, the candidate for ordination adopts the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms* as his statement of faith as part of the corporate body of the denomination. That does not mean that he would necessarily say everything the same way as it is said in the Standards, but he stands with the church in testifying with this statement of faith. Second, he adopts them as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture. That means that he affirms that the Bible teaches not merely various propositions and precepts, but a coherent system of doctrine, which the *Westminster Standards* embody. Third, this system of doctrine has certain fundamentals, or essential doctrines, exceptions to which must be reported to the appropriate church judicatory. By implication, there might be exceptions to parts of the Standards which might not be deemed as fundamentals of the system of doctrine.

The language of the second ordination vow was adopted by the first General Assembly in 1788: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the confession of faith of this church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures?" At the same time, the Assembly approved amendments to Chapter XXXI as well as Chapters XX and XXIII, as well as one to the *Larger Catechism*, regarding the civil magistrate. The language "system of doctrine," however, goes back at least to 1758, when the Old Side and New Side reunited as the Synod of New York and Philadelphia. The relevant parts of their joint declaratory statement were as follows:

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 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. . . .

The Synod of 1758 clearly viewed itself as in continuity with the Synods of the past in adopting the *Westminster Standards* as a whole, even though they were aware of the scruples previously allowed with regard to the civil magistrate. This leads us back to consideration of the Synod of 1729, when the American Presbyterian Church originally adopted the *Westminster Standards*.

### III. *The Adopting Act of 1729*

Much controversy has swirled around the interpretation of the Adopting Act of 1729 whereby the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church in colonial America adopted the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms* as its doctrinal standards. In both the Old Side/New Side division of the eighteenth century and the Old School/New School division of the nineteenth century, the stricter subscriptionists have emphasized the actual adopting action in the afternoon of September 19, and the fact that the only exceptions taken were to portions of Chapters XX and XXIII of the *Confession* having to do with the civil magistrate. The other side has emphasized the “Preliminary Act,” adopted in the morning of the same day, which makes reference to “all the essential and necessary articles.”

#### 1. *The Language of the Adopting Act*

A balanced position must take the two together as the action of the Synod on a single day, the afternoon’s adopting action as the concluding act and the morning’s preliminary action as part of the immediate historical context. The reference to “essential and necessary articles” occurs five times in the “Preliminary Act,” in which a method is proposed for dealing with any scruple a minister or candidate may have:

[W]e . . . agree that all the ministers of 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.

[A]ll the Presbyteries . . . shall always take care not to admit any candidate of the ministry . . . but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession. . . .

[I]n case any minister . . . 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 . . . , 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. . . .

The adopting action that afternoon was as follows:

All the ministers of this Synod now present, except one that declared himself not prepared, viz., [eighteen names follow], after proposing all of the scruples that any of them had to make against any articles and expressions in the Confession of Faith, and 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.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. *The Interpretation of the Adopting Act*

Eighteen of the nineteen ministers present unanimously adopted the *Confession* and *Catechisms* as their confession. They provided a way for men to express their exceptions concerning articles of faith or doctrine including worship or government and concerning articles of the *Catechisms* as well as of the *Confession*, although the only unresolved exceptions involved portions of the *Confession* concerning the civil magistrate. The Westminster doctrinal standards were adopted with only one qualification concerning the civil magistrate, and a method was established for deciding whether exceptions violated essential and necessary articles—namely, to have the candidate or minister express his exception and let the Presbytery or Synod decide.

This construction is correct, as evidenced by the very 1727 overture proposing adoption of the *Westminster Standards*—from John Thompson, the leader on behalf of strict subscription—which overture included the possibility of teaching something contrary to the Standards if first discussed by Presbytery or Synod:

[I]f any minister within our bounds shall take upon him to teach or preach anything contrary to any of the said articles, unless, first, he propose the said point to the Presbytery or Synod to be by them discussed, he shall be censured so and so.<sup>3</sup>

The Adopting Act thus was a compromise, satisfying both strict subscriptionists like John Thompson and also broader evangelicals like Jonathan Dickinson, because it provided a doctrinal standard with which all were in general accord,

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from the Synod minutes in Maurice W. Armstrong, Lefferts A. Loetscher, and Charles A. Anderson, eds., *The Presbyterian Enterprise* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 30-32.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Charles Hodge, *Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1851), 1:141.

and it also provided a method of dealing with possible exceptions.<sup>4</sup> That it was a compromise also appears from the departure at this point of a few dissatisfied strict subscriptionists who joined some of the Scottish secessionist groups in America.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. *The First American Heresy Trial*

The Synod of 1730 sought to clear up some contemporary misunderstanding of the Adopting Act by passing unanimously the following:

Whereas some Persons have been dissatisfied at the Manner of wording our last years [*sic*] Agreement about the Confession &c: supposing some Expressions not sufficiently obligatory upon Intrants; overtured yt [*sic*] the Synod do now declare, that they understand those Clauses that respect the Admission of Intrants or Candidates in such a sense as to oblige them to receive and adopt the Confession and Catechisms at their Admission in the same Manner and as fully as the Members of the Synod did that were then present.<sup>6</sup>

This action makes it clear that a minister seeking to join the Presbyterian Church in America must adopt the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms*. What remained unclear is whether he may express scruples only with regard to the civil magistrate or any difference, letting the Synod or presbytery determine if such a difference is acceptable, being not essential or necessary.

These issues were resolved in the first American heresy trial involving Samuel Hemphill, an eloquent young preacher, who came to America from Northern Ireland and eventually garnered the support of Benjamin Franklin for his deistic and moralistic sentiments. He turned out, however, to have plagiarized his sermons from some leading Unitarians in England. In determining that he should be removed from the Presbyterian ministry, the Commission of Synod issued *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission*, in which crucial light is shed on the method of confessional subscription following the Adopting Act.

In particular, the Commission took umbrage with Hemphill's defense that, at the time of his ordination, "*all he declared to at his Admission into the Synod, were the fundamental Articles of the Confession of Faith.*"<sup>7</sup> In fact, Hemphill had "(d)ecleared his Assent to every Article in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and in the Larger and Shorter *Catechisms*, without one Exception" and had made assurances that

<sup>4</sup> This is the view of Charles Hodge (*Constitutional History*, 1:152) and also of John Murray ("Creed Subscription in The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A." [Unpublished article, Westminster Theological Seminary Library, 1979], 4).

<sup>5</sup> Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 49.

<sup>6</sup> Guy S. Klett, ed., *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706-1788* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), 108.

<sup>7</sup> *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission of the Synod: in answer to some observations on their proceedings against the Reverend Mr. Hemphill* (Philadelphia: Andrew Bradford, 1735), 22.

“he had before Subscribed the same in *Ireland*.”<sup>8</sup> In this context, the Synod summarizes the Adopting Act of 1729:

[T]he Synod came to an unanimous Agreement about a Test of Orthodoxy, and of our Union in the essential Articles of Christianity, in the following method. It was agreed that all of the Ministers in this Synod, do 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 adopt them as the Confession of their Faith, &c. And in Case any Minister of this Synod, or any Candidate of the Ministry, shall have any Scruple with respect to any Article or Articles of the said *Confession* or *Catechisms*, he shall at the Time of his making said Declaration, declare his Scruples to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall notwithstanding admit him to the Exercise of the Ministry within their Bounds, and to ministerial Communion; if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his Scruple or Mistake to be only about Articles not essential or necessary, in Doctrine, Worship or Government.<sup>9</sup>

The Synod then goes on to explain that “if Mr. Hemphill had any Objection to make, against any Thing in the *Confession* or *Catechisms*, he should have particularly offered his Objections, and submitted it to the Judgment of the Synod, whether the Articles objected against, were essential and necessary, or not.” Hemphill’s sincerity was then called into question because he took no exceptions to the Standards when given a chance to do so during his ordination examination. The Synod also refuted one of the arguments upon which Hemphill apparently relied:

Nor is it any Excuse, that the Synod have not defined how many fundamental Articles there are in the *Confession*; since they have reserved to themselves the Liberty to judge upon each Occasion, what are, and what are not Fundamental.<sup>10</sup>

Here we have again the preliminary part of the Adopting Act from the morning of September 19, 1729, with two very significant aspects that shed light on how to construe the Adopting Act. First, five years after the Confession was adopted, with exceptions acknowledged only with regard to clauses in the Chapters XX and XXIII concerning the civil magistrate, Hemphill was asked not just whether he only took exception to Chapters XX and XXIII, but whether he took *any* exceptions to the *Westminster Standards*. Second, the Synod declined to define which articles are fundamental, but reserved the right to make that judgment on a case by case basis.

#### IV. Methodology for Subscription

The methodology made clear in the Synod’s response to the Hemphill case is the historic method of subscription in American Presbyterianism. It also is the

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 24.

method that we should employ today. The candidate professing to adopt the *Westminster Standards* should declare any exceptions that he may have, and then the Presbytery should decide whether his exceptions are such that he cannot be deemed as sincerely taking his ordination vow (e.g., the second ordination vow). If that is the case, then the Presbytery should not approve him for ordination. On the other hand, if the Presbytery determines that his exceptions do not represent a violation of his ordination vow, he should be ordained and should also be able to teach such exceptions, since he is conscience-bound to teach the whole counsel of God, as revealed in Scripture, whose authority he also has affirmed elsewhere in his ordination vows. But he should teach such exceptions with utmost sensitivity to the peace and purity of the church.

### 1. *Four Practical Results*

Four practical results follow from this view of subscription. First, it safeguards orthodoxy. By allowing—indeed requiring—that officer candidates declare exceptions to the *Westminster Standards*, we avoid a glib kind of total subscription and thus safeguard purity of doctrine by forcing all differences out into the open. Second, it promotes knowledge of the *Westminster Standards* since it compels candidates to study them seriously, carefully comparing their teachings with Scripture. Third, it promotes honesty by avoiding mental reservations as the presbytery—the court of the church most intimately acquainted with the candidate and most readily able to deal with stated exceptions—has the original responsibility to examine, always with the prospect of review by the higher court. Fourth, it promotes rule by Scripture. We value the *Westminster Standards* and sincerely receive and adopt them as the corporate confession to which we are personally committed; nevertheless, we must maintain a distinction between them (which are subject to correction and revision) and Scripture (the very Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice).

### 2. *Charles Hodge's Understanding*

Any substantial discussion of confessional subscription in Presbyterianism necessarily entails the views of Charles Hodge (1797–1878).<sup>11</sup> This major Princeton theologian wrote significantly on the subject on at least four occasions, primarily in *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church*, first published in 1839 (vol. I, pp. 127ff.) and then subsequently in articles from the 1858 and 1867 *Princeton Review* reprinted in *The Church and Its Polity* (1879), as well as an earlier article in the *Princeton Review* of 1831.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Murray, “Creed Subscription,” 8-10, 19-24. (“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” [19-20].)

<sup>12</sup> See Hodge, *Constitutional History*, 1:127ff.; *The Church and Its Polity* (London: T. Nelson, 1879), 317-42; and “Remarks on Dr. Cox’s Communication,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 3 (1831): 514-43.

Some claim that Hodge changed his view from an earlier (*Constitutional History*) to a later (*Church Polity*) position on subscription;<sup>13</sup> however, he himself claimed in 1858 that his views were the same then as those he expressed in October 1831. At that earlier date, in an article entitled “Remarks on Dr. Cox’s Communication” in the old *Princeton Review*, Hodge opposed, on the one hand, the “substance of doctrine” view and, on the other hand, the “every proposition” view. What a Presbyterian minister subscribed to in the second ordination vow, he said, was the “system of doctrine” of the *Westminster Standards*. According to Hodge:

In professing to adopt the Confession of Faith as containing the system of doctrines taught in the sacred Scriptures, a man professes to believe the whole series of doctrines constituting that system, in opposition to every other. That is, he professes to believe the whole series of doctrines which go to make up the Calvinistic system, in opposition to the Socinian, Pelagian, Semi-Pelagian, Arminian, or any opposite and inconsistent view of Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

When asked what latitude of explanation should be allowed, he answered: “any which does not really affect the essentials of a doctrine.” And when further asked who is to judge, he answered that it is first a matter for every man to judge in the sight of God, but secondly, “the Presbytery has a right of judgment in all such cases.”<sup>15</sup> He concludes this section by saying that the great mass of Presbyterians

are ready to say that no man can consistently be a minister in our Church who rejects any one of the constituent doctrines of the Calvinistic system contained in the Confession of Faith; while from necessity and from principle, they are willing to allow any diversity of view and explanation not destructive of their nature, that is, not amounting to their rejection.<sup>16</sup>

The mature views of Hodge in 1858 were essentially the same as the views he set forth in 1831. In 1858 he opposed a “substance of doctrine” view and also an “every proposition” view. In his discussion of the Adopting Act of 1729, he equated the “necessary and essential articles” with “the system of doctrine.”<sup>17</sup> By equating these concepts, he did not mean the necessary and essential articles of the gospel, or of the Christian faith broadly understood, but rather, the necessary and essential articles of the Reformed, Calvinistic, or Augustinian faith—

<sup>13</sup> Murray, loc. cit., p. 22; cf. also a paper, “Confessional Subscription,” commended for study by the Tenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (*Minutes of the Tenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* [Atlanta: The Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1982], 221).

<sup>14</sup> Charles Hodge, “Remarks on Dr. Cox’s Communication,” *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* 3:4 (October 1831) 522.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 523.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 524-25.

<sup>17</sup> C. Hodge, *The Church and Its Polity* (London, England: 1879), 329.

that is, the system of doctrine of the *Westminster Standards*.<sup>18</sup> Hodge claimed that this was a matter of history, which his contemporaries could readily recognize.<sup>19</sup>

The *Westminster Confession*, he said, contains three classes of doctrines: (1) those common to all Christians as summed up in the ancient creeds, (2) those common to all Protestants and by which they are distinguished from Romanists, and (3) those peculiar to the Reformed Churches and by which they are distinguished from the Lutherans, from the Arminians, and from other sects of later origin. To all of these doctrines a Presbyterian minister subscribes when he adopts the system of doctrine of the *Westminster Standards*.

Did Hodge, then, hold a different view in 1839 when he wrote *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church* as a justification of the Old School position? In this historical context, he stressed 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.”<sup>20</sup> But in 1858 he wrote: “It is a perfectly notorious fact, that there are hundreds of ministers in our Church, and that there always have been such ministers, who do not receive all the propositions contained in the *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*.”<sup>21</sup> When we examine *Constitutional History* further, however, we find that Hodge was perfectly consistent. He clearly regarded the “Preliminary Act” as part of the Adopting Act of 1729, which he viewed as a compromise. His emphasis in interpreting the meaning of “the essential and necessary articles” was that it meant, not the essential and necessary articles of the *gospel* (which was his understanding of the New School approach<sup>22</sup>), but the essential and necessary articles of the *Confession*:

Ever since the solemn enactment under consideration, every new member or candidate for the ministry has been required to give his assent to this confession, as containing the system of doctrines taught in the word of God. He assents not merely to absolutely essential and necessary articles of the gospel, but to the whole concatenated statement of doctrines contained in the Confession.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>19</sup> “If the question, ‘What is the system of doctrine taught by the Reformed Churches?’ be submitted to a hundred Romanists, to a hundred Lutherans, to a hundred members of the Church of England, or to a hundred sceptics, if intelligent and candid, they would all give precisely the same answer. There is not the slightest doubt or dispute among disinterested scholars as to what doctrines do, and what do not belong to the faith of the Reformed” (*Ibid.*, 333).

<sup>20</sup> C. Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, Pa.: 1851), 1:155-56.

<sup>21</sup> C. Hodge, *Church and Its Polity*, 330.

<sup>22</sup> A. A. Hodge in Appendix I to his *A Commentary on the Confession of Faith* (Philadelphia, Pa.: 1869), pp. 539-43, describes his father’s discovery by 1870 that the New School, as represented by Dr. Henry B. Smith, had not held officially to such a “substance of doctrine” view. Cf. George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 215-27.

<sup>23</sup> C. Hodge, *Constitutional History*, 1:183; cf. pp. 149, 150, 151, 158, 159, 185 and 215 for further discussion of the “essential and necessary articles.”

Hodge describes the system as “concatenated,” by which he means those doctrines connected as with a chain to form the Reformed or Calvinistic or Augustinian tradition. As shown above, Hodge’s view did not move from an early, stricter position to a later, more lax one; rather, he maintained a position throughout his career which he believed was consistent with the language and intent of the Adopting Act of 1729—that is, a subscription that required adoption of the *Westminster Standards* with its Calvinistic system of doctrine, although not necessarily with agreement to every proposition. The Presbytery would have to decide if a candidate’s exception to the *Westminster Standards* was contrary to the system of doctrine. Hodge did not regard such matters as “vows and oaths, of the civil magistrate, of marriage” as essential to the system,<sup>24</sup> but he did so regard the distinctive doctrines of the Augustinian system.<sup>25</sup> In this context, he comments about the Augustinian system:

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 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.<sup>26</sup>

Hodge’s view, then, is consistently contrasted with a “substance of doctrine” view, or what is essential to Christianity or the gospel (which is what he understood the New School view to be in the nineteenth century), and with an “every proposition” view. What one is subscribing to in adopting the *Westminster Standards* is the Reformed system of doctrine, with every doctrine essential to that system.

Hodge’s view was the Old School position of Old Princeton, as represented also by B. B. Warfield, who held that the ordination vow is “a vow demanding of all who accept our *Confession of Faith* that they accept it as a system of doctrine; and that they affirm by their acceptance of it that this system of doctrine is the system of doctrine that is taught in Holy Scripture.”<sup>27</sup> The language

<sup>24</sup> C. Hodge, *Church and Its Polity*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 338-40. Hodge made further comments on subscription in his articles, “Presbyterian Reunion,” *Princeton Review*, 40 (Jan. 1868), 57ff.; “The New Basis of Reunion,” *Princeton Review* 41; (July 1869), 462-66; “Retrospect on the History of the Princeton Review,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review: Index Volume, 1825-1868* (Philadelphia, Charles Scribner and Co., 1871), 1-39, esp. 22-26.

<sup>26</sup> *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 39 (1867): 511-12.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Proposed Union with the Cumberland Presbyterians,” *Princeton Theological Review* 2 (1904): 295-316, quote on pp. 314-15.

“only as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures,” according to Warfield, means:

“only in this sense, namely, as containing the *system* of doctrine”—that is to say, not in its every proposition or mode of statement, but only in the system of doctrine it contains, to wit, the Calvinistic system. There is, so far as we know, no difference of opinion as to the import of the ordination vow in our Churches: it is everywhere understood and administered as binding those taking it merely to the system and not to the detailed manner of stating that system; but as binding them strictly to the system in its integrity and in its entirety. As such it has been justly lauded as combining in itself all reasonable liberty with all reasonable strictness—binding as it does to the great system of doctrine expressed in the Confession with absolute strictness, and yet leaving room for all possible individual preferences in modes of conceiving and stating this system. Under this combined strictness and liberty every genuine form of Calvinism has an equal right of existence under the Confession. . . . But beyond the limits of generic Calvinism the right of adoption ceases. Our vow of ordination is not a solemn farce: and the terms of our adoption of the Confession are not so phrased as to enable us to seem to adopt it while not adopting it at all.<sup>28</sup>

In an earlier article, Warfield warned of an overly strict subscription as being then practiced in Scotland and concluded:

We observe, then, . . . [t]hat so long as we remain a Calvinistic Church, the American Church, with its free and yet safe formula of acceptance of the Confession, is without the impulse which drives on some other churches to seek to better their relation to the Standards. We have always accepted the Confession only for “the system of doctrine” contained in it, and hence since 1729 have possessed what the great Scotch churches are now seeking after.<sup>29</sup>

For Warfield, then, the American Presbyterianism excelled Scottish Presbyterianism by requiring that those ordained to office subscribe to the system of doctrine contained in the *Westminster Standards*.

### V. *Examples Facing the Twentieth-Century Church*

Having demonstrated that system subscription has been the consistent view of American Presbyterianism, we can learn from a few examples the twentieth century church has faced.

#### 1. *J. Gresham Machen on Premillennialism*

In *The Presbyterian Guardian*, J. Gresham Machen wrote that though the *Westminster Standards* oppose Premillennialism, a Premillennialist in the Presbyterian Church of America (now the OPC) can still hold to the system of doctrine taught in those standards:

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> *Presbyterian Review* 10, no. 40 (Oct. 1889): 656-57.

It is true, the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms teach not the Premillennial view but a view that is opposed to the Premillennial view. That is particularly plain in the Larger Catechism (Q. 87 and 88).

But subscription to the Westminster Standards in The Presbyterian Church of America is not to every word in those Standards, but only to the *system* of doctrine which the Standards contain.

The real question, then, is whether a person who holds the Premillennial view can hold that system. Can a person who holds the Premillennial view be a true Calvinist; can he, in other words, hold truly to the Calvinistic or Reformed system of doctrine which is set forth in the Westminster Standards? We think that he can; and for that reason we think that Premillennialists as well as those who hold the opposing view may become ministers or elders or deacons in The Presbyterian Church of America. . . . It is no new thing to take this position regarding creed-subscription. It is the position which has long been taken by orthodox Calvinistic theologians.<sup>30</sup>

## 2. *Amendments Concerning the Civil Magistrate*

The American Presbyterian Church amended parts of Chapters XX, XXIII, and XXXI of the *Westminster Confession* in the late 18th century, but somehow neglected to amend the Larger Catechism Q. 191 on the second petition of the Lord's Prayer: ". . . we pray that . . . the Church [may be] . . . countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate. . . ." This is one statement to which I have taken exception. (Other amendments have pertained to the Pope as the Antichrist and to degrees of affinity and consanguinity in marriage in Chapter XXIV.4.)

## 3. *Pictures of Jesus*

Although I do not advocate pictures or portrayals of Jesus, I find it difficult to be in accord with *Larger Catechism* Q. 109 on sins forbidden in the second commandment: ". . . the making any representation of God, . . . of any of the three Persons, either *inwardly in our mind*, or outwardly in any kind of image . . ."), when reading such a passage as John's vision of our Lord in Rev 1:10-16. I believe the *Larger Catechism* statement represents a Puritan over-reaction to Roman Catholic abuses, and therefore, I have declared an exception to this particular part of the Standards.

## 4. *Sabbath Practice*

A more common example of a modern-day exception concerns Sabbath observance. I believe it is incumbent upon candidates, elders, and ministers in Presbyterian churches to be sabbatarian—that is, to hold to the continuing relevance of the fourth commandment. The *Larger Catechism* QQ. 117 and 119, however, appear to me to go beyond the teaching of Scripture with regard to

<sup>30</sup> "Premillennialism," *The Presbyterian Guardian* (October 24, 1936), 21.

some “recreations as are on other days lawful.” We should seek to maintain the spirit of the Sabbath as our Lord Jesus taught and exemplified it in Mark 2:23–3:6.

### VI. *The Model of the 1758 Reunion of Old Side and New Side*

Not quite a century after the reunion of Old Side and New Side in 1758, Hodge could write of the united Synod’s five-page, eight-point statement:

This noble declaration is for our church what the declaration of independence is for our country. It is a promulgation of first principles; a setting forth of our faith, order, and religion, as an answer to those who question us. It is the foundation of our ecclesiastical compact, the bond of our union. Those who adhere to the principles here laid down, are entitled to a standing in our church; those who desert them, desert not merely the faith but the religion of our fathers, and have no right to their name or their heritage.<sup>31</sup>

What this declaration represented was a reaffirmation of both emphases that the two sides had stressed—the Old Side doctrinal orthodoxy of adherence to the *Westminster Standards* and the New Side commitment to revivalistic preaching for the sake of evangelism. The number of ministers in the New Side had almost quadrupled during the seventeen-year division, but such leaders as Gilbert Tennent had come to recognize the evils of extreme enthusiasm in religion and of the censorious spirit of itinerant preachers who would denounce the character of the local minister. Thus, the reunion represented a renewed commitment to both orthodox doctrine and spiritual experience with consequent obedient life and witness. The declaration stated:

Accordingly we unanimously declare our serious and fixed resolution, by divine aid, to take heed to ourselves that our hearts be upright, our discourse edifying, and our lives exemplary for purity and godliness; to take heed to our doctrine that it be not only orthodox, but evangelical and spiritual, tending to awaken the secure to a suitable concern for their salvation, and to instruct and encourage sincere Christians.<sup>32</sup>

The statement concluded on this note:

Finally, we earnestly recommend it to all under our care, that instead of indulging a contentious disposition, they would love each other with a pure heart fervently, as brethren who profess subjection to the same Lord, adhere to the same faith, worship, and government, and entertain the same hope of glory. And we desire that they would improve the present union for their mutual edification, combine to strengthen the common interests of religion, and go hand in hand in the path of life; which we pray the God of all grace would please to effect, for Christ’s sake. AMEN.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1851), 281.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 280-81.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

This prayer appears to have been answered, as during the next thirty years, the Presbyterian Church experienced rapid growth and an influence surpassed perhaps only by the Congregationalists. Concerning the unity of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia in this period, Hodge comments: "It is probable there never was a period of equal length in the history of our church in which there was such a general and cordial agreement among our ministers on all doctrinal subjects." As he concludes his survey of the Synod minutes of this period, he states:

The members of this Synod were, to a remarkable degree, harmonious in their doctrinal views. There is no indication of diversity of opinion on any important subject; there were no doctrinal controversies, and but one instance of the infliction of censure for erroneous opinions. Besides this negative evidence, we have the positive proof to be found in the frequent declarations of the adherence of the Synod to the Westminster Confession, and the unanimous adoption of that formula as a part of the new constitution.<sup>34</sup>

This period would seem to provide us with an exemplary model, to unify Presbyterians who are agreed on the truth of Scripture and committed to spread the gospel.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.