

The Nature, Limits and Place of Exceptions and Scruples in Subscription to the Doctrinal Standards of the Presbyterian Church

by
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State of the Question (statis questionis)

Second ordination question (FOG XIII.9): “***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?***” To what extent does the system of doctrine bind the ordinand to the *Confession of Faith and Catechisms*? Do we subscribe to the *ipsissima verba* of the *Confession of Faith and Catechisms*? Or do we subscribe to the “system of doctrine” only? Is there a difference between a “scruple” and an “exception”. If so what is it? How do we determine which scruples and/or exceptions, if any, are acceptable?

An Overview of the History of Subscription in the Presbyterian Church

The question before us is one that has been hotly debated throughout the history of Presbyterianism in America. The subject of subscription was not, however, new in America. Protestant subscription to creeds can be traced as far back as Calvin’s Geneva (1536).¹ Subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles by English Presbyterians can be found as early as 1571.² From this period through to the beginning of the eighteenth century in the English context, according to David Hall: “obviously subscription meant submission to the stated doctrine and a whole-hearted embracing of the *credenda*, without equivocation or mental reservation—...”³ The Scottish context reveals a clear-cut statement on subscription in the vow of subscription used at the 1693 General Assembly: “I do sincerely own and declare the above Confession of Faith, ... to be the Confession of my faith, and that I own the doctrine therein contained to be the true doctrine, which I will constantly adhere to.”⁴ Confessional historian Ian Hamilton notes the shift from the earlier Scottish subscription in which the minister “owned ... the whole doctrine contained”, to an adoption of the “general sense” of the Confession, which led to doctrinal decline by the eighteenth century.⁵ There is clear evidence that the Scottish as well as the English contexts of subscription during the time of American Presbyterian debate which led to the 1729 Adopting Act favored a very strict view of subscription.⁶

The American adoption of the Confession and Catechisms in 1729, however, is fraught with ambiguities which have led Presbyterian scholars to widely differing interpretations of the intent and consequences of that act. James Payton maintains that the

¹ David W. Hall, “On the Hermeneutics of Subscription,” David W. Hall, ed. *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1995) 2.

² *Ibid.*, 3, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11. Cf. the full and strict vow taken by licentiates on p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13, 14.

outcome of that action was a *via media* on the matter of subscription which laid the foundation for the subsequent differences between Old and New Schools. He also argues that the unique precision of the *Westminster Standards* made it difficult to require the same unqualified subscription which the church had demanded of previous creeds such as the *Three Forms of Unity*.⁷ The ambiguity of the Adopting Act was also noted in the nineteenth century by strict subscriptionists Charles Hodge and A. A. Hodge.⁸ Thus the 1729 Adopting Act represents a compromise between opponents of subscription, like Jonathan Dickinson, and “strict” subscriptionists, like John Thompson and George Gillespie, within the Synod of Philadelphia.⁹ Those who held a mediating position in the presbytery were represented by Thomas Craighead.¹⁰ Others, like Charles Hodge, who believe that a “strict” view was intended by the adopters, point to the 1736 interpretation stating the “jot and tittle” intentions of the original act. Even so Hodge understood the Act to be a “compromise ... to avoid schism.”¹¹

The cause of the ambiguity is that two separate actions were taken on September 19, 1729. In the morning the text of the act was passed. This bound ministers to “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 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.” Ministers or candidates who had “scruples” must “declare them to the Presbytery or Synod” and these bodies would “judge” as to whether these scruples were “only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government ... not necessary points of doctrine” or not. In the afternoon session certain scruples were considered, having to do with the articles regarding the civil magistrate (Chapters 20 and 23). The form of subscription, in the second vow of ordination, adopted as constitutional law by the Synod of 1788, though it does not directly quote the Adopting Act of 1729, embodies its intention.¹² This 1788 vow is precisely the vow used by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church today (*FOG XIII.9*, see above). It should be carefully noted that the general statement of the morning action was “preliminary” to the actual Adopting Act passed in the afternoon session. The latter alone bore Synodical authority.¹³

Charles Hodge argued that the strict view of subscription was the intention of the adopters, while admitting “...that the language of the act leaves the intention of its authors a matter of doubt.”¹⁴ Hodge doubts the integrity of those who would interpret the language of the Adopting Act to committing them to “only so much of the Confession as is essential

⁷ James Payton, Jr. “Background and Significance of the Adopting Act of 1729.” *Pressing toward the Mark* (Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986) 131, 134, 135. Cf. Luder G. Whitlock, Jr., “The Context of the Adopting Act,” ed. by David W. Hall *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1995) 99. For the entire text of the Adopting Act see Appendix A, p.

⁸ Luder G. Whitlock, Jr., “The Context of the Adopting Act,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 99, 100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 97ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 98, 99.

¹¹ Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1851) in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 109

¹² James Payton, Jr. “Background and Significance of the Adopting Act of 1729.” *Pressing toward the Mark* (Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986) 138.

¹³ George W. Knight, III, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 121.

¹⁴ Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History*, in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 107.

to the gospel.”¹⁵ He insists that “all the essential and necessary articles of the said Confession” refers to the whole fabric of the document. To abstract those articles essential to the gospel from the confession obviates the need of a confession.¹⁶ The “whole concatenated statement of doctrines”, while not requiring agreement with every “proposition” or “expression” used in stating a particular doctrine in the Confession, is what ministers subscribe to.

Hodge goes on to observe that the matter of scruples is more ambiguous, but none-the-less was intended to set forth a strict view of subscription. The system of “doctrine, worship and government” cannot be separated from all of its constituent elements of what is Presbyterian. Hodge accounts for the dissatisfaction of many and the subsequent latitudinarian interpretations of the Act by the fact that the text of what was passed in the afternoon session, which contained the explanation of scruples as only referring to “some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters” was not printed and distributed with the Act itself.¹⁷ The Synod of 1730 thus had to explain that the “declaration” of the afternoon session was interpretive of the meaning of the Adopting Act passed in the morning session.

Since confusion and dissatisfaction continued in the church the Synod of 1736 declared that “the Synod have adopted and still do adhere to the Westminster Confession, Catechisms, and Directory, without the least variation or alteration...” It reiterated that the only scruples admitted were “some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters”.¹⁸ This was passed without objection (*nemine contradicente*). Payton’s reference to this act as “abortive” is mysterious in light of this unanimity. He seems to disregard the relationship of the two parts of the act in order to make the case that the Adopting Act was intended to be a looser departure from the British and Continental tradition of strict subscription.¹⁹ Several presbyteries at this time passed their own versions of subscription including the very strict Presbytery of New Castle which referred to the Confession and Catechisms “taking them in the true, genuine, and obvious sense of the words.”²⁰

As noted above the specific wording of the second vow which we presently use was adopted by the Synod of 1788. The words “adopt” and “receive” were used in the 1729 Adopting Act and clarified by the Synod of 1730: “to receive and adopt the Confession and Catechisms ... in the same Manner and as fully as the Members of Synod did.” Knight makes a convincing historical argument to prove that the phrase “System of Doctrine” refers to *each* and *every* article and doctrine of the Confession.²¹ In affirming it the candidate is subscribing to the entire body of teaching in the confession as a summary of what Scripture teaches. That is, we are not saying that we believe the articles of the confession “in as much as” they teach what is Scriptural, but rather we believe that all that they teach *is* Scriptural. If we do not believe this then we cannot in good conscience take the vow, i.e. “sincerely”.

Closer now to our own immediate context was the attempt by conservatives in the early part of this century to preserve the essence of historic Christianity by asserting the minimal necessity of affirming the “five fundamentals”. As George Knight points out this had the unintended effect of reducing the “essential and necessary articles” of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111, 112.

¹⁹ Payton “Background and Significance” in *Pressing toward the Mark*, 137ff.

²⁰ Hodge, *The Constitutional History*, in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 114.

²¹ Knight, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 127ff.

Adopting Act to just five, even though the 1910 action of the General Assembly referred to the “five fundamentals” as “certain essential and necessary Articles of Faith.” “When the Assembly of 1927 gave to the individual presbytery the right to determine which articles or doctrines the presbytery would consider as part of the system of doctrine of the confessional standards the Assembly abandoned the past history of American Presbyterianism.”²²

In reviewing this history one thing is clear: the idea of the “system of doctrine” has been used by those holding doctrines seriously deviating from our Confession and Catechisms. The danger is in viewing the “system” as a kind of supra-confessional body of truth which transcends the text of the confession itself. This view obviates the whole idea of having a confession in the first place. This becomes especially problematic in the modern context of Neo-orthodox and Deconstructionist hermeneutics. As a carefully worded summary of the perspicuous and essential teachings of Scripture a creed must be affirmed in its entirety as a system or not at all. A cogent warning appears in the 1834 “Act and Testimony” framed by Dr. R. J. Breckenridge as a protest of the Old School against the “loose” view of subscription held by the New School: “2. We testify against the unchristian subterfuge to which some have recourse, when they avow a general adherence to our standards *as a system*, while they deny doctrines essential to the system, or hold doctrines at complete variance with the system.”²³

On the other hand, in seeking to preserve the full subscriptionist view we must not require more than our strictest forefathers have. The kind of doctrinal errors that the Old School opposed in the view of subscription to which they objected in the 1834 “Act and Testimony” were Socinian, “Arminian and Pelagian heresies”,²⁴ matters of central importance to the system. Not every word, phrase or even teaching must be either adhered to or even understood in order to hold to this orthodox view of subscription to our Confessional Standards.

An overture from the Presbytery of Northern California in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was presented to the Sixtieth General Assembly in 1993 which proposed changes in the second ordination vow.²⁵ The Assembly sent it back because it lacked the required “grounds” and it has never reappeared.²⁶ It defines “system of doctrine” as “the whole body of truth which the Holy Scriptures teach. The Confession of Faith and Catechisms are to be received by the licentiate and officer as a most satisfactory exposition of this truth in an integral and indivisible whole. By receiving and adopting the standards, he thereby affirms and agrees with nothing less than the complete set of assertions contained in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms.” This is similar to, but not exactly, what Charles Hodge maintained was the original intention of the Adopting Act of 1729. Hodge emphasized the integrity of the system, not the “complete set of assertions”.

At this point I will summarize Charles Hodge’s treatment of this issue in *Church Polity*, “Adoption of the Confession of Faith” (pp. 317-335; this was formerly an article in the *Princeton Review* 1858, p. 669). Hodge distinguishes among three views of what the subscription vow commits a minister to when he declares that the Confession and

²² *Ibid.*, 140ff.

²³ Morton H. Smith, *Subscription to the Westminster Standards in the Presbyterian Church in America*. n.d., 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Cf. the sixteen “Specifications of error in the Memorial,” 52-54.

²⁵ *Minutes of the Sixtieth General Assembly*, pp. 81-83.

²⁶ John R. Muether, “Confidence in Our Brethren: Creedal Subscription in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 307.

Catechisms contain “the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures”. He subscribes to: 1) the substance of doctrine 2) every proposition 3) the system of doctrine. A fourth distinction may be drawn from number 3).²⁷ By the “system of doctrine” Hodge understood *essential* doctrines, not every doctrine. The overture noted above would seem to indicate a fourth view: 4) every doctrine.

Hodge explores the implications of the criteria for vows and oaths: 1) the historical meaning of the words 2) the *animus imponentis* (“the intention of the party imposing the oath”).²⁸ He concludes: “The Confession must be adopted in the sense of the Church, into the service of which the minister, in virtue of that adoption, is received.” Thus the intention of the church in its adoption of the confession, along with the history of its deliberations on exceptions must be taken into account.

Thus, Hodge concludes regarding view 1): “From the beginning, therefore, the mind of our Church has been that the ‘system of doctrine’ in its integrity, not the substance of those doctrines, was the term of ministerial communion. ... the phrase ‘substance of doctrine’ has no definite assignable meaning.”²⁹ On the other end of the spectrum view 2) “is contrary to the *animus imponentis*, or the mind of the Church.”³⁰ The “words ‘system of doctrine,’ have a definite meaning, and serve to define and limit the extent to which the Confession is adopted.”³¹ To require the adoption of every proposition or teaching is to invite hypocrisy and foster disunity. “We are not sure that we personally know a dozen ministers besides ourselves, who could stand the test.”³² “Whenever a man is induced either to do what he does not approve, or to profess what he does not believe, his conscience is defiled. ... It [the requirement of adopting every proposition] fosters a spirit of evasion and subterfuge.”³³

Hodge’s own position, view 3), varies from position 4) in that he does not believe that the “system of doctrine” requires subscription to every single doctrine taught in the confession. Hodge takes his cue from the original Adopting Act of 1729, which refers to the “essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine” and defines “scruples” as “only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government.”³⁴ Thus the “system” excludes articles not part of the “whole system in its integrity.”³⁵ Hodge is careful to distance himself from the view that *essential* refers only to the “doctrines of the gospel.”³⁶ *Essential* refers, rather, to the entire “system of doctrines common to the Reformed Churches.”³⁷ This includes all teachings on doctrine, worship and government, which are *essential* to that system. There are three categories of such teachings: 1) those common to all Christians, expressed in the early councils of the ancient church; 2) those common to all Protestants, as distinct from Romanism; 3) those peculiar to Reformed Churches, as distinct from Lutheran and Arminian.³⁸ On the other hand Hodge gives examples of doctrines not essential to the

²⁷ I owe this distinction to Dr. T. David Gordon.

²⁸ Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878) 319.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 324.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 327.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 326.

³² *Ibid.*, 331.

³³ *Ibid.*, 332.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 329.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 326.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 333.

system which are consistent with the kind of exceptions noted by the Adopting assembly. These are doctrines “relating to civil magistrates, the power of the state, conditions of Church membership, marriage, divorce, and other matters lying outside of the ‘system of doctrine’ in its theological sense...”³⁹ As important as the Confession’s teaching on these doctrines is, Hodge maintains, the Church has been wise not to make them conditions of ministerial communion.

Definition of Terms

Loose or “system subscription”⁴⁰ - Affirms the essential doctrines of the “system of theology”. Not every doctrine taught in the Confession is included in this view.

Strict or “full subscription”⁴¹ - Affirms every doctrine in the Confession and Catechisms; not every word or phrase, but every doctrine.

Scruple - lit. L. *scrupulus*, small sharp stone, especially in a shoe, causing uneasiness, therefore, doubt based on conscientious reasons (qualms). The Assembly which produced the Adopting Act of 1729 defined “scruples” and how they should be dealt with: “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 the said declaration, declare his sentiments to the said 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...*”⁴² While it can be demonstrated that the original intention regarding scruples was limited to certain teachings about the civil magistrate in his relationship to the church in chapters 20 and 23, it is also clear that from the beginning scruples have been understood to refer to a wider range of exceptions, due to the ambiguity of the original definition of scruples.⁴³ Debate over the extent to which exceptions are acceptable has continued ever since.

George Knight calls our attention, however, to the definition of scruple, in light of the afternoon declaration (which is the Adopting Act), which defined the scruples to which that Synod took exception, as well as the official clarifications of 1730 and 1736. “Essential and necessary articles and doctrines”, according to Knight, includes *every* article and doctrine in the Confession. Scruples were defined as “extra-essential and non-necessary points.” The only scruples allowed in 1729 were “some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters”. These non-essentials as well as “expressions” or modes of articulating articles or doctrines were the only categories of scruples accepted by the Synod as permissible in subscription.⁴⁴ Furthermore, this definition limited the matters on which Presbyteries and Synods could judge. According to Knight, they are not at liberty to

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Subscription to the Westminster Standards*, 3, 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 11, from *Minutes of Synod*, p. 104. Emphasis added.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁴ Knight, “Subscription to the Westminster Confession,” in Hall, *Confessional Subscription*, 126.

decide which doctrines and articles are essential, since they are *all* essential as part of the system.

Hodge differed on this point in allowing other doctrines to be considered nonessential and unnecessary to the system. Whereas Knight would appear to consider “extra-essential and non-necessary points” to be limited to modes of expression of the doctrines of the Confession, Hodge took the example of clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters concerning the civil magistrate as precedents for doctrinal exceptions not essential to the system as articulated in the other Reformed confessions. Clearly the clauses regarding the civil magistrate to which many in the adopting assembly took exception were more than mere modes of expression, but rather concerned specific doctrines about the role of the civil magistrate which the American church could not affirm. Our own John Murray took exception to the Confessional doctrine of divorce and remarriage on the matter of remarriage in the case of abandonment.

Exception - As far as I can ascertain “exception” is synonymous with “scruple”.⁴⁵ Although in our Presbytery “exception” has been used as if it were more serious than a “scruple”⁴⁶, there is no support for this distinction in the history of our churches. One deviation from this is found in the above mentioned overture to the sixtieth General Assembly.⁴⁷ The overture defined an “exception” as

a dissent from, an objection to, or a mental reservation about *any assertion* contained in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms and is to be distinguished from an inconsequential objection to a proposition or from a quibble or from a reservation about terminology. However, such a distinction is to be made only by the judicatory, never by the individual. No officer or licentiate shall presume to have the right of making self-evaluation regarding this distinction.

An exception to the confessional standards may be granted by a judicatory, for the sake of conscience, only if 1) it affects a peripheral and minor assertion in the standards, not a central and fundamental one, 2) it does not vacate the central teaching of any chapter in the Confession or overturn a complete answer to any question in the Catechisms, and 3) it does not undermine the system of truth in the Confession and Catechisms as a whole.

Here the distinction is made among scruples in which an “exception” is a non-essential assertion, whereas “inconsequential objection” or “quibble” is an “expression” with which one disagrees. However confusing the terminology may be, the substance of an historical understanding of the intentions of the Adopting Act of 1729 are present in the overture. These are three: 1) no exceptions or scruples may be admitted if they undermine the complete set of assertions contained in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms, 2)

⁴⁵ Smith, *Subscription to the Westminster Standards*, Smith simply uses the terms “scruple” and “exception” interchangeably throughout his paper.

⁴⁶ Email from The Rev. William Shishko (Sept. 1998) “An ‘exception’, as I would understand it, is something you believe is either wrong or stated wrongly in the confession, i.e. it is something you disagree with. (Personally, I don’t believe a man should be able to teach his exception, e.g. I believe that proponents of the framework hypothesis need to declare an exception to the confession...and should not be able to teach that view). A ‘scruple’ is something that you have a conscience problem with, e.g. you have a scruple against being bound to teach a six day creation if - in fact - it is determined that is the actual meaning of the confession. Yes, you’re probably right about that [that there is no distinction between “scruple” and “exception” in the history of this discussion]. More to the point is the question of whether a man is permitted to TEACH what he holds as scruple/exception.”

⁴⁷ *Minutes of the Sixtieth General Assembly*, pp. 82. Emphasis added.

there are two categories of exceptions or scruples: peripheral or minor assertions, and quibbles over terminology, 3) only the Presbytery may decide what is or is not a proper or admissible exception or scruple.

In light of the confusion over the terms scruple and exception I will use “exception/scruple.”

A Case in Point: Creation in Six Days

WCF 4.1 It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of His eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days, and all very good.

The phrase “in the space of six days” has raised the question of subscription in our presbytery. In subscribing to this paragraph of the Confession we must first ask: “What is required by the words of this paragraph?” The affirmation that: the Triune God, as the sole Creator, has freely created all things, visible and invisible, out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), by a series of eight divine commands (*fiats*),⁴⁸ to display His own glory; the events of Genesis 1 and 2 were historical, in which Adam and Eve were uniquely created in God’s image, at a specific point in time in a particular place (space-time history);⁴⁹ all was created good, and under the Lordship of the Trinity.

The precise duration of the “six days” has never been agreed upon by orthodox Christians. It would seem unwise to focus on what is unclear, when so much else is at stake, and *is* clear. It would also seem unwise for anyone to be dogmatic, therefore about precisely what that duration is, whether from Kline’s “Framework Hypothesis” perspective; the “Day-age Theory”; or from a literal twenty-four hour day or “Ordinary Day” perspective, provided the ordinand or minister can affirm what is summarized above. As far as I can determine all of those who have been ordained in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, who have held to the “Framework Hypothesis” or the “Day-age Theory”, have affirmed the historicity of Genesis 1 and 2 and the special creation of Adam and Eve.

That no measure of such solar day existed until day four was observed by Augustine. Our own Dr. J. Gresham Machen observed:

The Book of Genesis seems to divide the work of creation into six successive steps or stages. It is certainly not necessary to think that the six days spoken of in the first chapter of the Bible are intended to be six days of twenty-four hours each. We may think of them rather as very long periods of time. But do they not at least mark six distinct acts or stages of creation, rather than merely six periods in which God molded by works of providence an already created world?⁵⁰

Machen goes on to assert: “The real question at issue here is the question whether at the origin of the race of mankind there was or was not a supernatural act of God.”⁵¹ It

⁴⁸ Dr. Joseph Pipa has suggested the following language in affirming creation *ex nihilo*: “eight fiat acts of ontological origination.”

⁴⁹ Dr. Joseph Pipa has suggested that macro-evolution be repudiated both within each of the days and in the creation of man.

⁵⁰ J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (1937. Reprint. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965) 115.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

should be remembered that these quotations come from what was originally a series of radio lectures in which Machen sought to communicate clearly the most salient points of Reformed teaching to a popular audience. Someone might respond that Machen was not confronted by the onslaught of evolutionary unbelief which we face. I think that it can be shown historically that Machen was quite well aware of both evolutionary views and the threat that they posed to the church, as the larger context of the above quotes demonstrates.

In assessing the relative importance of the phrase “in the space of six days,” it should be noted that in all of the Creeds of Christendom, including all of the Magisterial Reformation up until *The Irish Articles of Religion* in 1615, there is no mention of the *six days* or the duration of creation.⁵² The emphasis is on the fact that the triune God created all things out of nothing. *The Irish Articles* appears to have been the precursor of the language “in the space of six days” in our Confession. In appreciating the relative weight of the doctrines of the Confession, as opposed to every proposition by which those doctrines are expressed, Professor John Murray observed: “It seems to the present writer that to demand acceptance of every proposition in so extensive a series of documents [as the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms*] would be incompatible with the avowal made in answer to the first question to the formula of subscription and comes dangerously close to the error of placing human documents on a par with holy Scripture.”⁵³

Strict or full subscriptionists have always allowed minor exceptions, which are as Samuel Miller explained “of little or no importance, and interfered with no article of faith.”⁵⁴ Morton Smith, another strict subscriptionist, opines, “The ordinand, who takes exception to a particular teaching of the Confession or Catechisms, may be ordained by the Presbytery, if it feels that the exception does not impinge upon the basic system of doctrine contained in the Standards. If one is not able thus to subject himself to the brethren, he should seek some other communion, where he has greater liberty.”⁵⁵ The various understandings of the duration of the days of creation has never been understood to impinge on the essential doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. One may fully affirm the statement that God “created all things of nothing, in the space of six days, and all very good” without committing oneself to a particular interpretation of the length of those days. That there was a definite beginning and ending to God’s creative acts, and that those acts were by divine command (*fiat*) and not by providential development, as Machen points out, is required by the statement. That each day was of a particular length is not.

While I believe that the intention of those who adhere to the twenty-four hour day, or “Ordinary Day” view (among whom I count myself) is to preserve the integrity of the doctrine of creation, I think it unwise to make this interpretation of the duration of the six days a Confessional requirement. It is not in the best interests of the preservation of orthodoxy to speak dogmatically where the meaning of Scripture is not crystal clear. Nor do we need to explain everything in order to affirm the essential doctrines of our Confession, e.g. the Trinity.

On the other hand, I believe that if we affirm the duration of the “six days” to be open to a variety of legitimate reformed interpretations, we should insist that those views may be presented but not taught as the final word on this subject in the church. Dr. Joseph

⁵² This includes: *The French Confession of Faith* (1559); *The Second Helvetic Confession* (1566); *The Heidelberg Catechism* (1563); *The Belgic Confession* (1561); *The First Scotch Confession* (1560); and *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (1563, 1571).

⁵³ Murray in Smith, 80.

⁵⁴ Smith, 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

Pipa, who cogently defends the “Ordinary Day” view of Genesis 1 and 2, and who has significant exegetical concerns with the “Framework Hypothesis”, has suggested the “Framework Hypothesis” be allowed as an exception as long as those who take the exception can affirm that in Genesis 1 and 2 there are eight fiat acts of ontological origination; and deny macro-evolution within the days and in the creation of Adam and Eve. The writer of Hebrews (11:3) gives a terse summary of our faith at this point: “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.”

Conclusions

1. The original “preliminary” act along with the Adopting Act of 1729, in light of its subsequent elucidation in 1730 and 1736, intends a full subscription to the entire system of doctrine articulated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*.
2. While misunderstandings and later perversions of this intention may have lead to a loose or “substance” view of subscription, the “system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures” refers to the whole body of articles and doctrines in its integrity as a system, expressed in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*. Candidates and ministers must affirm that all the articles of the system taught in the Confession are essential and necessary.
3. Exceptions/scruples are only admissible if they concern non-essential doctrines, “propositions,” phrases or words. Non-essential refers to articles, “propositions,” phrases or words which do not alter our understanding of the articles and doctrines essential to the system expressed in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*.
4. Presbyteries have authority to decide the admissibility of exceptions/scruples only within the limits of non-essential articles, “propositions,” phrases or words in accordance with the historical decisions of the courts of the Church.

Appendix A - The Adopting Act of 1729 *Approved at the morning session, September 19, 1729*

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 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 ministers of this Synod, or that hereafter shall 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 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 also 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 function 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 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 who 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.⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ James Payton, Jr. "Background and Significance of the Adopting Act of 1729." *Pressing toward the Mark* (Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986) 136, 137.

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