

What It Means to “Receive and Adopt” the Westminster Standards

by Dr. S. Donald Fortson III

In the early 18th Century, American Presbyterians determined that it was necessary to adopt a doctrinal statement in order to declare their common faith. The Synod of Philadelphia in 1729 adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as the confession of their faith. In the 1729 “Adopting Act,” Presbyterians declared 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.”

The Adopting Act stipulated that ministers may state their “scruples” with the Confession, i.e., describing places where they had disagreements with particular articles. After hearing the candidates’ scruples, a Presbytery would determine whether or not these reservations were about articles “essential and necessary” in doctrine, worship, or government. If scruples were judged to be over “extra-essentials,” the minister was admitted as a member. This established the principle of liberty of conscience.

When the first General Assembly met in 1789, they endorsed the Adopting Act and established a formula for subscribing the Confession that was included in the Form of Government. The subscription formula asked this question of the ministerial candidate: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the confession of faith of this church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?” The phrase “system of doctrine” was understood to include not only fundamental catholic Christianity and the evangelical doctrines of the Protestant Reformation, but also the unique Reformed or Calvinistic system of doctrine embodied in the Westminster Standards. It was the Reformed system of the Confession that distinguished the Presbyterian theological heritage from Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Arminian systems of doctrine.

The 1789 formula of subscription has served American Presbyterians well for more than

200 years. Amidst significant doctrinal diversity, schism, and reunion, the historic subscription vow has stood the test of time as a median position between the extremes of strict subscription (every word) and a minimal subscription requiring “essentials of Christianity only.” The historic moderate doctrinal position of Presbyterianism has allowed diversity in expressing the Reformed faith while at the same time affirming our distinctives as Reformed people committed to the doctrines of grace.

When a church officer takes the traditional ordination vow in the EPC, he or she is affirming a personal commitment to the doctrines displayed in the Westminster Standards. The subscription vow is understood to be an acknowledgment of the Reformed or Calvinistic “system of doctrine” as expressing one’s own belief of what the Holy Scriptures teach. This vow allows one freedom to express reservations about parts of the Confession provided these “scruples” are not about “essential” components of the Reformed system. It is the duty of sessions and presbyteries when examining candidates for church office to determine what constitutes an essential of the “system of doctrine” found in the Confession and Catechisms. The balance of individual liberty and commitment to Reformed theology is a hallmark of Presbyterianism and a value we hold dear.