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What is Meant by Adopting the Westminster Confession?

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

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

* The question in the American Formula is in the following terms:— "Do you sincerely believe and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?"

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

So also of the doctrine of inability. That man is by the fall rendered utterly indisposed, opposite, and disabled to all spiritual good, is a doctrine of the Confession as well as of Scripture. And it is essential to the system of doctrine embraced by all the Reformed Church. Whether men have plenary power to regenerate themselves, or can co-operate in the work of their regeneration, or can effectually resist the converting grace of God, are questions which have separated Pelagians, the later Romanists, Semi-Pelagians, Lutherans, and Arminians, from Augustinians or Calvinists. The denial of the inability of fallen man, therefore, of necessity works the rejection of Calvinism. But if the fact be admitted, it is not

essential whether the inability be called natural or moral; whether it be attributed solely to the perverseness of the will, or to the blindness of the understanding. These points of difference are not unimportant, but they do not affect the essence of the doctrine.

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

The same strain of remark might be made in reference to the other great doctrines which constitute the Augustinian system. Enough, however, has been said to illustrate the principle of interpretation for which Old School men contend. We do not expect our ministers should adopt every proposition contained in our Standards. This they are not required to do. But they are required to adopt the system; and that system consists of certain doctrines; no one of which can be omitted without destroying its identity. Those doctrines are:—the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and the consequent infallibility of all their teachings;—doctrine of the Trinity; that there is one God subsisting in three persons, the Father, Son, and Spirit, the same in substance and equal in power and glory;—the doctrine of decrees and predestination, as above stated;—the doctrine of creation, viz., that the universe and all that it contains is not eternal, is not a necessary product of the life of God, is not an emanation from

the divine substance, but owes its existence, as to substance and form, solely to his will; and in reference to man, that he was created in the image of God, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, and not *in puris naturalibus*, without any moral character;—the doctrine of providence, or that God effectually governs all his creatures and all their actions, so that nothing comes to pass which is not in accordance with his infinitely wise, holy, and benevolent purposes;—the doctrines of the covenants; the first, or covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience; and the second, or covenant of grace, wherein God freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give, unto all who are ordained unto life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe;—the doctrine concerning Christ our Mediator, ordained of God to be our Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Saviour of his Church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world; unto whom he did, from eternity, give a people to be his seed, to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified; and that the eternal Son of God of one substance with the Father, took upon him man's nature, so that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion; that this Lord Jesus Christ, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father, and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven for all those whom the Father hath given to him;—the doctrine of free will; viz., that man was created not only a free agent, but with full ability to choose good or evil, and by that choice determine his future character and destiny; that by the fall he has lost this ability to spiritual good; that in conversion, God, by his Spirit, enables the sinner freely to repent and believe;—the doctrine of effectual calling, or regeneration; that those, and those only, whom God has predestinated unto life, he effectually calls, by his Word and Spirit, from a state of spiritual death to a state of spiritual life, renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining their wills, thus effectually drawing them to Christ; yet so that they come most freely; and that this effectual calling is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything foreseen in man;—the doctrine of justification; that it is a free act, or act of grace on the part of God; that it does not consist in any subjective change of state, nor simply in pardon, but includes a declaring and accepting the sinner as righteous; that it is founded not on anything wrought in us or done by us; not on faith or evangelical obedience, but simply on what Christ has done for us, -i.e., in his obedience and sufferings unto death; this righteousness of Christ being a proper, real, and full satisfaction to the justice of God, his exact justice and rich grace are glorified in the justification of sinners;—the doctrine of adoption; that

those who are justified are received into the family of God, and made partakers of the Spirit and privileges of his children;—the doctrine of sanctification; that those once regenerated by the Spirit of God are, by his power and indwelling, in the use of the appointed means of grace, rendered more and more holy; which work, although always imperfect in this life, is perfected at death;—the doctrine of saving faith; that it is the gift of God, and work of the Holy Spirit, by which the Christian receives as true, on the authority of God, whatever is revealed in his Word; the special acts of which faith are the receiving and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life;—the doctrine of repentance; that the sinner, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but the odiousness of sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of his own sins, turn from them unto God, with full purpose and endeavour after new obedience;—the doctrine of good works; that they are such only as God has commanded; that they are the fruits of faith; that such works, although not necessary as the ground of our justification, are indispensable, in the case of adults, as the uniform products of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers;—the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints; that those once effectually called and sanctified by the Spirit can never totally or finally fall from a state of grace; because the decree of election is immutable; because Christ's merit is infinite, and his intercession constant; because the Spirit abides with the people of God; and because the covenant of grace secures the salvation of all who believe;—the doctrine of assurance; that the assurance of salvation is desirable, possible, and obligatory, but is not of the essence of faith;—the doctrine of the law; that it is a revelation of the will of God, and a perfect rule of righteousness; that it is perpetually obligatory on justified persons as well as on others, although believers are not under it as a covenant of works;—the doctrine of Christian liberty; that it includes freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemnation of the law, from a legal spirit, from the bondage of Satan and dominion of sin, from the world, and ultimately from all evil, together with free access to God as his children. Since the advent of Christ, his people are freed also from the yoke of the ceremonial law. God alone is the Lord of the conscience, which he has set free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. The doctrines concerning worship and the Sabbath, concerning vows and oaths, of the civil magistrate, of marriage, contain nothing peculiar to our system, or which is matter of controversy among Presbyterians. The same is true as to what the Confession teaches concerning the Church, of the communion of saints, of the sacraments, and of the future state, and of the resurrection of the dead, and of the final judgment.

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

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

That such a party has existed is plain—1. Because, in our original Synod, President Dickinson and several other members openly took this ground. President Dickinson was opposed to all human creeds; he resisted the adoption of the Westminster Confession, and he succeeded in having it adopted with the ambiguous words, “as to all the essential principles of religion.” This may mean the essential principles of Christianity, or the essential principles of the peculiar system taught in the Confession 2. This mode of adopting the Confession gave rise to immediate and general complaint. 3. When President Davis was in England, the latitudinarian Presbyterians and other Dissenters from the Established Church from whom he expected encouragement and aid in his mission, objected that our Synod had adopted the Westminster Confession in its strict meaning. President Davis replied that the Synod required candidates to adopt it only as to “the articles essential to Christianity.” 4. The Rev. Mr. Creaghead, member of the original Synod, withdrew from it on the ground of this lax rule of adoption. 5. The Rev. Mr. Harkness, when suspended from the ministry by the Synod for doctrinal errors, complained of the injustice and inconsistency of such censure, on the ground that the Synod required the adoption

only of the essential doctrines of the Gospel, no one of which he had called in question.

While it is thus apparent that there was a party in the Church who adopted this latitudinarian principle of subscription, the Synod itself never did adopt it. This is plain, because what we call the Adopting Act, and which includes the ambiguous language in question, the Synod call “their Preliminary Act;” i.e., an Act preliminary to the actual adoption of the Westminster Confession. That adoption was effected in a subsequent meeting (on the afternoon of the same day), in which the Confession was adopted in all its articles, except what in the twenty-third chapter related to the power of the civil magistrate in matters of religion. This is what the Synod itself called its Adopting Act... When in 1787 the General Assembly was organized, it was solemnly declared that the Westminster Confession of Faith, as then revised and corrected, was part of the CONSTITUTION of this Church. No man has ever yet maintained that in adopting Republican constitution, it was accepted only as embracing the general principles of government common to monarchies, aristocracies, and democracies.

The Old School have always protested against this Broad Church principle—1. Because, in their view, it is immoral. For a man to assert that he adopts a Calvinistic confession when he rejects the distinctive features of the Calvinistic system, and receives only the essential principles of Christianity, is to say what is not true in the legitimate and accepted meaning of the terms. It would be universally recognized as a falsehood should a Protestant declare that he adopted the canons of the Council of Trent, or the Romish Catechism, when he intended that he received them only so far as they contained the substance of the Apostles’ Creed. If the Church is prepared to make the Apostles’ Creed the standard of ministerial communion, let the constitution be altered; but do not let us adopt the demoralizing principle of professing ourselves, and requiring others to profess, what we do not believe.

2. A second objection to the lax rule of interpretation is, that it is contrary to the very principle on which our Church was founded, and on which, as the Church, it has always professed to act.

3. The Old School have always believed that it was the duty of the Church, as a witness for the truth, to hold fast that great system of truth which in all ages has been the faith of the great body of the people of God, and on which, as they believe, the best interests of the Church and of the world depend.

4. This lax principle must work the relaxation of all discipline, destroy the purity of the Church, and introduce either perpetual conflict or death-like indifference.

5. There always has been, and still is, a body of men who feel it their duty to profess and teach the system of doctrine contained in our Confession in its integrity. These men never can consent to what they believe to be immoral and destructive; and therefore any attempt to establish this Broad Church principle of subscription must tend to produce dissension and division. Either let our faith conform to our creed, or make our creed conform to our faith. Let those who are convinced that the Apostles' Creed is a broad enough basis for Church organization, form a Church on that principle; but do not let them attempt to persuade others to sacrifice their consciences, or advocate the adoption of a more extended formula of faith which is not to be sincerely embraced.

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