

JONATHAN DICKINSON AND THE SUBSCRIPTION CONTROVERSY

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The uses to which churches and parachurch organizations put their creeds, confessions and statements of faith are varied and multiform. So also is the degree of prudence attending those uses, as subsequent events seem always to demonstrate. To be wiser than we are, to make the best use we can of the creeds, confessions and statements we have devised, we must learn to listen to the churchmen and theologians of the past, deducing from them and their experience how best to apply our fundamental documents to churchly endeavor in a fallen world. We seldom do better than when we make good use of the hard-won wisdom of the ages, without which we are consigned to ignorance and to reinventing the ecclesiastical or theological wheel. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to examine one such illustrative episode in American Church history—namely, the subscription controversy that surrounded the Adopting Act in colonial Presbyterianism—and to glean from it the prudence needed to address more effectively the double menace of clerical misconduct and doctrinal deviation, two of the most pernicious ecclesiastical problems to which we have applied our fundamental theological texts, though not always with good effect. In so doing we shall examine the Act's cultural and ecclesiastical background, its historical unfolding, its intention, and its wisdom—or lack thereof.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Like most of the colonials who attempted to transplant Old-World institutions to the American wilderness, the Presbyterians of the middle colonies tended to address emerging threats or challenges on the basis of the models inherited from their own particular backgrounds. Whether those models were readily transferable was a question that remained abstract, indeed unanswerable, until a concrete situation called forth a solution. When those difficulties surfaced, the arduous process of applying, modifying and reapplying those models began.

The ecclesiastical challenge that most fully initiated this process for the young Presbyterian church in America centered around the moral laxity of two of its ordained members, Robert Cross and John Clement. Cross' infraction was fornication. Believing it a single and momentary lapse, and aware

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of the quick and full confession made by the offender, the Synod of Philadelphia administered only a slight penalty: Cross was suspended from clerical duties for four Sundays.¹ The next year, 1721, Clement was found guilty of being “overtaken with drink,” using “abusive language,” “quarreling” and “stabbing a man,” for which he was suspended for one year.² This shocking moral erosion in its ranks caused the synod to take stock of itself and to formulate proposals designed to forestall or remedy these and other failures. Not surprisingly the various proposals offered to the synod reflected the religious heritage of the parties proposing them.

In the early eighteenth century the Synod of Philadelphia was a unique blend of two ecclesiastical traditions and theological mind-sets. Within its small compass the synod was home to both a Scotch-Irish contingent, whose training and heritage rendered its members more likely to be the traditionalists or conservatives on each newly rising issue, and a New England party, whose emphasis was on personalized religion bound only by the Word of God and individual conscience. The confluence of these two traditions within the infant synod meant that controversy was inevitable. As new problems arose, the Scotch-Irish naturally tended to impose the structure and rigidity of Old-World Presbyterianism while the New Englanders opted for a freer, less hierarchical approach. The Scotch-Irish tended to translate the Old-World model of a strong, centralized ecclesiastical government and rigid creedal conformity into a world as yet ecclesiastically unshaped. The New Englanders, by contrast, fearing a return to what they considered the too-rigid control over religion from which their forefathers had narrowly escaped, naturally sought theological and moral protection in places other than tight ecclesiastical control. They advocated the open-church model that had lately evolved in Massachusetts under the influence of Solomon Stoddard, the illustrious grandfather of Jonathan Edwards and the so-called “Pope of the Connecticut River Valley.”

As the Synod of Philadelphia expanded, it naturally experienced the inevitable growing pains associated with ecclesiastical bodies—namely, the problem of maintaining purity in doctrine and practice. The questions that loomed largest for the Presbyterians in the earliest years were those triggered by the Cross and Clement affairs, questions concerned with what and how disciplinary authority should be vested with the synod and what standards ought to be adopted, the debate surrounding which is known as the subscription controversy.

The alignment of forces in this controversy tended to follow ethnic lines, as it did on almost every major issue facing the synod in years to come. The vigorous orthodoxy of the Scotch-Irish, which to the New Englanders seemed dangerously exaggerated, was intended to keep the Church doctrinally pure and experientially holy by insisting on unqualified orthodoxy from ministers and candidates by means of enforced subscription to certain creedal formu-

¹ *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America 1706–1788* (ed. G. S. Klett; Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976) 46.

² *Ibid.* 49.

lae, in this case the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.³ Because no properly established or sufficiently powerful church court yet existed in American Presbyterianism before which such issues could be determined, mandatory subscription, imposed at the synodical level, appeared to the Scotch-Irish as a practical necessity. The Scotch-Irish were exceedingly wary of any minister or candidate for ordination who refused to submit to subscription. Experience in Scotland taught them that, more often than not, those who refused (or even balked at) confessional subscription eventually wound up within the more liberal Church of England. Refusal to subscribe was considered the first step toward Arminianism or something worse. To the Scotch-Irish, rigorous doctrinal requirements seemed the best antidote for clerical immorality and theological deviation.

This approach seemed wholly inadequate and ill-advised to the New Englanders, led by Jonathan Dickinson, pastor of the church in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and later the first President of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University. Because they were primarily of English ancestry as well as of New England birth and education (nearly all were educated at Yale), they reflected the “semi-Presbyterianizing” (or ministerial “consociations”) of New England congregationalism. Endeavoring to remain true to their Puritan heritage they maintained that mandatory subscription to any creed, even one as admirable as the Westminster Confession, was at best unnecessary and at worst counterproductive. They repeatedly returned to their central contention: The Bible alone is sufficient as a rule of faith and practice.

In other words, even though both sides supported the Westminster Confession as a highly appropriate standard of belief they disagreed as to how one ought best to employ that confession. In that light the dispute over enforced subscription was one more of polity than of pure doctrine. In that all were broadly Calvinistic Presbyterians they found the Confession proper. As to whether confessional conformity could promote or protect the Church’s moral and doctrinal purity they were at odds.

II. THE CONTROVERSY UNFOLDS

In 1721 the Scotch-Irish party, led by George Gillespie and spurred on by the Cross and Clement affairs mentioned above, made an overture before the synod to take action whereby the moral laxity lately discovered among them could be controlled if not eradicated. Gillespie urged the synod to act in a way suitable to “the better carrying on in the matters of our government and discipline.”⁴ By this he meant “enforced orthodoxy.” Gillespie considered the synod duty-bound to maintain doctrinal and moral purity among its members. This obligation, he contended, is best performed by subscription to the

³ This is not to say that only Scotch-Irish were on the one side and that only New Englanders were on the other. The alignments were partially mixed (the Tennants being notable examples). For the sake of brevity and in accord with historiographic custom the parties are labeled here as the Scotch-Irish and the New England parties.

⁴ *Minutes* (ed. Klett) 51.

Westminster Confession. In response to Gillespie's overture, a few of the New England party (Dickinson, Malachi Jones, Joseph Morgan, John Pier-son, David Evans, Joseph Webb) entered a formal written protest. Their objection, they said, was not to the intent of Gillespie's proposal but to its means. To push back moral and doctrinal decay was necessary, they all agreed. But to do so with creeds or confessions was a remedy ill-suited to the problem. Action on Gillespie's overture was postponed until a suitable answer to the New Englanders' protest could be raised by Daniel McGill and George McNish.⁵

In a short time, however, both the protest and the answer to it were with-
drawn⁶ when four of the New Englanders (Jones, Morgan, Dickinson, Evans) submitted a paper with four points of conciliation, which both sides found highly acceptable and which quelled the contention, at least temporarily. The four points, much more conciliatory to the Scotch-Irish position than any stance the New Englanders were to take for several years, were as follows:

[1.] We freely grant, yt there is full executive Power of Church Government in Presbrys and Synods, and yt they may authoritatively, in ye Nam of Christ, use ye Keys of Church Discipline to all proper Intent and Purposes, and yt the keys of the Church are committed to the Church officers and them only.

[2.] We also grant, yt the meer Circumstantial of Church Discipline, such as the Time, Place and Mode of carrying on in the Government of the Church belong to Ecclesiastical Judicatories to determine as occasions occur conformable to the general Rule in the word of God yt require all things to be done decently and in order. And if these things are called Acts we will taken no offence at the word, provided yt these Acts be not imposed upon such as conscientiously dissent from them.

[3.] We also grant, yt Synods may compose Directories, and recommend them to all their Members respecting all the Parts of Discipline, provided yt all subordinate Judicatories may decline from such Directories when they conscientiously think they have just Reason so to do.

[4.] We freely allow yt Appeals may be made from all Inferiour to Superiour Judicatories, and yt Superiour Judicatories have Authority to consider and determine such Appeals.⁷

The synod as a whole, apparently mindful of the large step toward harmony that the New Englanders were taking, and approving the spirit of concord that evidently lay behind it, "was so universally pleased with the abovesaid composure of their difference yt they unanimously joyned together in a Thanksgiving prayer and joyful singing ye 133 psalm."⁸ The synod declared that things "be in all respects as if no such protest had been made."⁹

The New Englanders' magnanimity becomes all the more obvious when these four points, which acknowledged the full legitimacy of synodical con-

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. 57.

⁷ Ibid. 57-58.

⁸ Ibid. 58.

⁹ Ibid. 57.

trol, are compared to the sermon that Dickinson, as incumbent moderator of the synod, preached at the opening session. In that sermon,¹⁰ based on 2 Tim 3:17, Dickinson sought to establish the extraneous and harmful character of imposing human laws on the Church when it was already the recipient of all necessary endowments from Christ in the Scriptures. This argument Dickinson attempted to make in two ways: (1) by showing what constituted a minister an authentic servant of God, and (2) by proving that the Holy Scriptures alone were sufficient to the minister's being properly equipped for his divinely-appointed task.

According to Dickinson a minister is a man of God in that he has his calling and commission from him, is employed in his service, and acts in his stead. A minister is a teacher and instructor of souls. He presides over divine worship and is the mouthpiece of God. He is, on the human level, the ruler of Christ's household. He holds the whip of discipline in his hands. He is a steward, a watchman and an ambassador. But he is not God. He has no right or need to impose any new laws upon the Christian ministry. He may not, for example, impose any laws concerning the mode of worship: "God's worship wants not to be deckt with ornaments of humane invention, nor the gait of uninstituted rites, to render it pleasing in his eyes."¹¹ To think we can worship God in a better or more decent way than he has provided, Dickinson argued, is both haughty and unseemly.

Neither may the man of God impose any new acts of constitution to the government and discipline of the Church. To do so is unwarrantable. Christ himself has already appointed a suitable form of rule for his house. He has not left it a city without walls or a vineyard without a hedge. He has already supplied it with the proper and necessary offices, ordinances, laws and censures. All the substantial of Church government are laid out in Scripture, Dickinson affirmed. Although these things are often set down for us in non-specific ways that require us to employ our highest wisdom in order to discover their proper application, yet it does not fall to us to invent new rules simply because the ones given us are general or unclear.

Common sense teaches us as much, he insisted, turning from Scriptural to prudential arguments. If we compose new rules for Church government, these rules will either be such as Christ has already made or else such as he has not. We need not make the first sort, and we dare not make the second. If we make such laws, they are either binding or they are not. If they are binding we have usurped from Christ his own peculiar kingly authority over the Church. If they are not binding they are useless as laws. Under no pretense is such ecclesiastical usurpation justified. Even if the laws we made were innocent in themselves and agreeable to all concerned, yet the "law making faculty" that we arrogate to ourselves would be an invasion into Christ's own prerogatives. According to Dickinson the imposition of obligatory interpretations of Scripture, even an interpretation as venerable as the Westminster

¹⁰ J. Dickinson, *A Sermon, Preached at the Opening of the Synod at Philadelphia, September 19, 1722* (Boston: Corn-Hill, 1723).

¹¹ *Ibid.* 13.

Confession, is foolish usurpation. Our interpretations of the Scriptures, he said, unlike the Scriptures themselves, are not infallible and are not perfect. That which combines error with truth is not to be insisted upon.

Though some might argue that his proposals left the infant synod with no power of censure in cases of scandal or heresy, Dickinson insisted otherwise: Virtually all the various denominations agree as to what constitutes that sort of scandalous living that disqualifies one from the ministry. This agreement arises among them even though they do not share adherence to the same confession of faith. As for heresy, Dickinson said, even though we have no right to impose our interpretations on heretics we certainly are under no obligation to accept theirs. We may, can and do reject them wherever they seem to fall short of divine truth. We do so without formal or required adherence to a confession.

Dickinson then admonished the synod not to shut out of its communion any ministerial candidate whom one could charitably argue that Christ has received into his. To do so is to make ourselves more sensitive to error and to vice than is God, which is both arrogant and preposterous. We must “open the doors of the Church as wide as Christ opens the gates of heaven and receive one another as Christ also received us.”¹² To do otherwise is to dare to do what even the apostles themselves would not do.

After this sermon and the ratification of the four points of conciliation by the New Englanders, the issue of enforced subscription lay formally submerged until it resurfaced in 1728. But though out of sight, the issue was hardly out of mind. The debate continued intermittently in person, in letter and in print. The resolution to the subscription controversy was finally prompted by John Thomson’s overture¹³ to the synod that year. He urged the synod officially to adopt the Westminster Confession and Catechisms and to require all ministers and ministerial candidates to subscribe to them. Because of its great importance and its potentially divisive nature the synod decided to postpone action on Thomson’s proposal, thus allowing the presbyteries a year to study it. During that time Thomson published his proposal, with a supporting preface, in Philadelphia.¹⁴

Thomson’s concern for the synod’s welfare arose from what he rightly perceived to be the precarious situation of his young denomination: It was feeble, and it was dependent upon outsiders for ministers and for money. It was subject to the dangers of heresy, schism, moral laxity and doctrinal impurity of various stripes and hues. Its best defense, as he saw it, was to enforce a comprehensive, external control in the form of a theological bond able to promote both unity and purity. By virtue of enforced adherence to the Westminster texts the synod could more effectively fence out doctrinal and moral corruption.

¹² Ibid. 23.

¹³ *Minutes* (ed. Klett) 98.

¹⁴ J. Thomson, *An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod of Dissenting Ministers* (Philadelphia, 1729).

To Thomson's publication Jonathan Dickinson replied in what was ostensibly an open letter to Thomson. Dated April 10, 1729, Dickinson's pamphlet¹⁵ is a 32-page, tightly reasoned essay that takes up Thomson's assertions point by point in order to expose what Dickinson considered the fallacies underlying the subscriptionist position.

Being careful not to impugn the piety and zeal that prompted Thomson to espouse publicly the need for mandatory subscription, Dickinson questioned the assertion that it was the duty of the synod authoritatively to impose the Westminster standards. Granting that it might be the duty of every Christian to "maintain and defend the truths of the gospel" (Thomson's phrase), Dickinson denied that this obligation necessitated mandatory subscription at the synodical level. For the subscriptionists to be fully consistent in their views, Dickinson argued, not only should they demand assent to the Westminster Confession by the various ministers in the synod but also those ministers should require it of every member and prospective member of their local churches, which Dickinson believed no one supported.

According to Dickinson, the subscriptionists defended their policy by implying that without such measures the Church is unsafe and unsheltered. To him this was manifestly not the case. Subscription was not a requirement in the primitive Church, which was not overtaken by heresy. Without resort to mandatory subscription the ancient Christians were able to detect and dispel the injurious tenets of the "Eustathians, Macedonians, Anomoioi, Eunomians, Photians, Luciferians, Anthropomorphites, Donatists, Apollinarians, Dimeritae, Massiliani, Antidicomorianitae, Collyridiani, Metangismonitae, Psathyrians, Eutichians, Seluciani, Patriciani, along with a long and almost endless et cetera."¹⁶ That being so, Dickinson asked, what need have we for mandatory subscription? Repeated historical examples could be raised in support of this point, he insisted. The Waldenses, the Wycliffites and the Lollards all flourished in purity of doctrine without subscription, while the Roman Church wallowed in error with it. The Presbyterian churches in Ireland and the churches of New England have been able to thrive peaceably for a long period of time without it. To Dickinson it was more than an obvious historical truth that subscription was not necessary for the well-being of a church.

Neither did subscription actually eliminate the doctrinal impurities that all abhor. It merely excluded honest dissenters. Those who were unscrupulous would affix their names to the Confession while holding views contrary to it. Those who are under no restraint of conscience sign, as it were, blindfolded and pay no heed to the content or context of that which they are affirming. This was precisely the case in the centuries surrounding the ecumenical councils and creeds, when such heretics as the "Arians, Macedonians, Eutichians, etc." all subscribed to orthodox statements when they were forced to do so or when it became expedient. But signing those documents

¹⁵ J. Dickinson, *Remarks Upon a Discourse* (New York: Smith-Street, 1729).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 7.

did not provide doctrinal purity or root out evil and error. In more recent times the Gallican and the Anglican churches have met with the same problems and results.

Dickinson then asked his colleagues to consider that even the heretics agreed that the sacred Scriptures are the foundation of true religion, yet they are still heretics. In that light, he said, we can see clearly that the imposition of any merely human creed will not do for us what the divinely-inspired Scriptures could not. We cannot express ourselves more clearly, more persuasively or more authoritatively than has the Holy Spirit in the Bible. It appeared to Dickinson that subscription would not be "of very glorious service to the church."¹⁷

To Thomson's assertion that every body politic, whether civil or ecclesiastical, needed an external bond of unity Dickinson replied that such a bond already existed in the synod's mutual affirmation of "Christ as our head" and the Scriptures as our "standard of faith and practice."¹⁸ We already acknowledge "one faith, one Lord, one baptism, and one discipline. What more is needful?"¹⁹

Dickinson argued that mandatory subscription was actually anti-Protestant in nature. Protestantism was born and raised on the principle of *sola Scriptura*. To make any human composition "the test of our orthodoxy is to make it the standard of our faith" and to "give it the honour only due to the Word of God."²⁰

Of course Dickinson was not opposed to confessions of faith generally or to the Westminster Confession in particular. He had a higher opinion of the Confession, he insisted, than "of any book of that kind extant in the world."²¹ He merely opposed the use of confessions as instruments of subscriptionism. Confessions were for instruction, for correction, for devotion, for declaration.²² That we should compose such a tool he supported, but that we should impose it he denied. He declared it a "glaring contradiction" to affirm chap. 20 of the Confession, which says "God alone is the Lord of conscience," and then to impose the rest of the Confession. In short, Dickinson's position on subscription was this: History proves its ineffectiveness, and neither Christ himself nor his apostles ever deemed it necessary. Hence it ought to be avoided.

Not content merely to undermine the prosubscription case, Dickinson proffered his own means of protecting the young Presbyterian church in America. Foremost, he insisted, we should thoroughly investigate the candidate himself so as to ascertain as best we can his "seriousness," "his natural or acquired abilities" and his general "ministerial qualifications."²³ We must meticulously investigate his "fitness for the work" by examining not only his theology but himself. Second, in addition to closely scrutinizing the character

¹⁷ Ibid. 14.

¹⁸ Ibid. 20.

¹⁹ Ibid. 22.

²⁰ Ibid. 25.

²¹ Ibid. 32.

²² Ibid. 27–28.

²³ Ibid. 17.

and fitness of the ministerial candidate, Dickinson proposed that a stricter discipline be enforced in the synod, especially with ministers of scandalous conduct, so as to forestall the spread of immorality. His final suggestion was to encourage ministers to be fully faithful and dutiful in their callings because “such painful [i.e. painstaking] Address to our business, joined with fervent prayer for success, is the proper engine to subvert the Kingdom of Satan and all its branches, and to confirm and establish the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ among us.”²⁴ Certainly Dickinson’s position had not changed in the seven years since his 1722 sermon. If anything his views became more forceful, more elaborate, more pointed.

When the synod reconvened in September 1729 it formed a committee purposely reflecting both sides of the issue.²⁵ It charged this committee to draft a platform for action that would prove amenable to all. Its proposal was presented in the morning session of September 19 and after extensive debate was unanimously received. This proposal, known as the Adopting Act of 1729, read as follows:

Although the Synod do not claim or pretend to any Authority of imposing our Faith on other Men’s Consciences; but do profess our Dissatisfaction with & abhorrence of Such Impositions, & do utterly disclaim all legislative Power & Authority in th Church, being willing to receive one another, as Christ has received us to the Glory of God, 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 & uncorrupt among us & so handed down to our Posterity: & do therefore agree, that all Ministers of the Synod or that Shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, Shall declare their Agreement in & approbation of the Confession of Faith with the larger & Shorter Chatechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential & necessary Articles good forms of sound Words & Systems of Christian Doctrine—& do also adopt the sd Confession & Chatechisms 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 necessary & Essential Articles of sd. Confession, either by Subscribing the sd. Confession of Faith, & Catechisms or by a Verbal Declaration of thir Assent thereto, as such Minister or Candidate shall think best. 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 sd Confession or Catechisms, he Shall at the Time of his making sd Declaration, declare his Sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who Shall notwithstanding admit him to the Exercise of the Ministry within our Bounds & to ministerial Communion, if the Synod or Presbytery Shall Judge his Scruple or Mistake to b only about articles not essential & necessary in Doctrine worship or Government. But if the Synod or Presbytery Shall Judge Such Ministers or Candidates erronious in essential & 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

²⁴ *Ibid.* 18.

²⁵ *Minutes* (ed. Klett) 103.

these extra-essential & not-necessary Points of Doctrine but treat them with the same Friendship, kindness & brotherly Love, as if they had not differ'd from us in Such Sentiments.²⁶

Formal ratification of the Act waited until the afternoon session where the synod

after proposing all the Scruples yt 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 Difies at Westminster, have unanimously agreed in the solution of those Scruples, and in declaring the sd. Confession and Catechisms to be the Confession of their faith, excepting only some Clauses in ye 20. and 23. Chapters, concerning which Clauses, the Synod do unanimously declare, yt 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.²⁷

All the ministers present²⁸ except for Daniel Elmer who “declared himself not prepared” (and who subscribed the next year) gave their assent to the proposed act. Euphoria reigned. What could have been an ecclesiastical tragedy ended in impressive solidarity, as they so noted: “The Synod observing that Unanimity, Peace and Unity which appeared in all their Consultations and Determinations relating to the Affair of the Confession did unanimously agree in giving Thanks to God in solemn Prayer and Praises.”²⁹

This time in the ratification of the Adopting Act the mantle of reconciliation was worn by the Scotch-Irish. Being heartily concerned for synodical peace they sought a way of compromise rather than of conquest. That they had a majority is beyond question. They outnumbered their New England counterparts by more than two to one and could have run roughshod over them had they so desired. Indeed for a while it seemed likely that just such an imposition would occur because for many months previously the two sides appeared firmly entrenched, and as the number of Scotch-Irish ministers and churches within the synod grew so also did the dread of doctrinal error magnify. Tension between the two parties proportionally rose. Distrust between the factions increased as one side attributed unhealthy motives to the other's actions. Because party boundaries were drawn along lines of nationality the issue was easily distorted in many minds into one of prejudice, not orthodoxy. Some New Englanders considered the Scotch-Irish enthusiasm for subscription to be a not-too-carefully-veiled attempt to purge the synod of the theology of English Puritanism and of the English descendants who held it (which it was not). The heat of the debate and the importance that both sides attached to the outcome served to blind some of the participants to the

²⁶ Ibid. 103–104.

²⁷ Ibid. 104.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

fact that the issues were not of nationality but of ecclesiology. It was a proposal designed to bar bad doctrine and practice, not bad bloodlines. The fact that eight years passed between the initial subscription proposal and the ultimate resolution of the affair in the Adopting Act of 1729 shows that the fears of the more extreme forces on either side were unfounded and that no secret designs were harbored. The synod moved carefully and deliberately in this whole affair so that the issue could be carefully and judiciously determined. The controlling forces served to influence the outcome so as to preclude extremist policies.

The ratification of this document is not only a tribute to the magnanimity of the Scotch-Irish but also an indication of the persuasive abilities of the New Englanders, especially Dickinson. If they were ever to win an acceptable resolution to the problem, the New Englanders needed to convince the Scotch-Irish moderates in the committee and the synod to cross over and support a proposal tempered by Puritan ecclesiology, which indeed they were able to do. When the synod met, a significant number of the antiproposition members were absent (Pemberton, Webb and Morgan, among others). In that much of his support was lacking, it stands as a decisive victory for Dickinson and the theological persuasion he championed. Though he could not convince the synod to expel the idea of subscription altogether, he persuaded it to allow what he called "scruples" in connection with the Westminster Confession. Furthermore the power of ministerial licensure was vested primarily with the presbyteries, where greater freedom could be exercised. In short, the final resolution of the issue is a tribute both to Dickinson's powers of persuasion and to the temperateness of a significant number of the Scotch-Irish, which combined to forestall an irreparable breach.

III. EVALUATION OF THE ADOPTING ACT

In examining the Adopting Act itself, the Dickinson party were pleased to note that God, and God only, would be the Lord of conscience and that the synod would not wax bold in making dictates in that area. The Thomson party, by comparison, were able to sit comfortably with the fact that the hierarchy would actively participate in the preservation of sound doctrine and moral purity. Both sides in the debate were pleased that although the synod did not possess sole control in these affairs there was still to be control—and freedom. The synod, as well as adopting the "scruples" proviso, decided not to claim for itself any exclusive disposition in the exercise of authoritative jurisdiction in candidacy proceedings, which it elected to share with the various presbyteries. This policy pleased the New Englanders as being in accord with their traditional polity, while it allowed the Scotch-Irish to maintain their own more rigid standards within their respective presbyteries. This outcome was also amenable to the New Englanders in that if such affairs had been discharged only at the synodical level they would surely have issued unfavorably because three of the four presbyteries in the Synod of Philadelphia were Scotch-Irish. The leniency desired by the New Englanders could be given full play within their own presbyterial jurisdiction.

Although the synod displayed an admirable spirit of amiable coexistence and principled conciliation, the document this spirit produced is largely to be criticized. It is well intentioned but highly defective, as the ensuing years demonstrated. The peace that this document fostered, though welcomed and real, was fragile and short-lived. Within twelve years the synod split bitterly, and in sixteen years an entirely new synod comprised of dissenting presbyteries was formed. Five fundamental criticisms may be leveled against the Adopting Act.

1. *The Adopting Act served to enshrine the two positions in the synod but did not provide an enduring, workable compromise.* All that falls before the word “yet” is agreeable to the New Englanders, and all that falls after it, up until “best,” is unsullied Scotch-Irish doctrine. As here stated the positions are contradictory, even mutually exclusive. It is fully self-stultifying for a document to declare (as the New Englanders demanded) that “we utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the Church” and admit to sacred ordinances all those whom we shall have grounds “to believe Christ will at last admit to the Kingdom of Heaven” and then to insist (as the Scotch-Irish demanded) that “all ministers . . . shall declare their agreement [with the Westminster Confession]” and that the synod would “always take care not to admit any candidate” who did not so subscribe. In short, though Christ himself might accept a nonsubscriber and though the New Englanders if left alone might be inclined to follow suit, the Scotch-Irish faction would reject him. The Adopting Act in effect allowed both parties to do as they pleased by establishing two polities instead of one. This was a policy on a collision course with itself.

2. *The document is defective as a basis for operation in that while it allows for dissent on matters not “essential and necessary” it glaringly omits any specification as to which articles were so deemed and which were not.* While it is one thing to insist that we punish lawbreakers, it is quite another to say just what the laws are.

3. *The Adopting Act failed to make any provision for a subsequent alteration in a candidate’s beliefs.* Subscription was required only once: upon entrance. No provision was made in the event of a subsequent change in position by a minister. Indeed just such a failure later cost the synod much debate and public embarrassment in the Samuel Hemphill affair. Hemphill, who signed the Westminster Confession, soon afterward turned to preaching from his pulpit the sermons of John Tillotson, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, whose latitudinarian doctrines were too rationalistic and too broad even for some of the New Englanders.

4. *The Adopting Act failed to specify whether the synod or the presbytery had the final authority for the acceptance or rejection of a candidate if one or the other body found the matter objectionable.* Three times it designates the jurisdiction as lying with the “Synod or Presbytery” but never specifies

whose answer is final. One might reasonably assume that the synod, as the higher body, would thus have final determination in this matter, but in practical terms it was not so. When John Rowland was accepted later by the Presbytery of New Brunswick in spite of synodical guidelines that should have excluded him, the synod acquiesced in his acceptance and decided rather to censure the entire presbytery for disorderliness rather than to reject a single questionable applicant.

5. *No provision was made for the unscrupulous subscriber.* In subscription procedures of this sort there can be no sure way to detect sincerity. To sign a document or to give verbal assent to it is easy. But publicly signing a document does not necessarily give an indication of the signer's actual theological stance or moral fitness. The real test, as Dickinson had warned, lay elsewhere: in the examination of the candidate's heart and work. While the synod or presbytery might be competent to examine the latter, only God could see the former. Dickinson's confidence that examination of the heart is possible arose from his Puritan conviction that sainthood—authentic Christian faith—was visible. A faith not manifest, a faith that does not surface, is probably no faith at all. If Christ is in the heart, his presence can be detected. Or so the argument went.

Despite the inherent weaknesses enshrined in the Adopting Act, it was held in prolonged veneration by the colonial Presbyterians. It remained the procedural standard of the Synod of Philadelphia without interruption, and when the rebel Synod of New York (generally comprised of those of New England leanings) formed, it was immediately adopted by them verbatim.³⁰ When the two synods reunited in 1758 it was again the universal standard of entrance required of all ministerial applicants. Despite its defects it remained always in force.

³⁰ Ibid. 263, 322.