The Westminster Confession of Faith in history

The Westminster Assembly of Divines was convened in 1643 after years of tension between Charles I and his increasingly Puritan Parliament. Meeting under the chairmanship of the learned William Twisse against the king's express wishes, the original vision of the assembly was to effect closer uniformity of faith and practice throughout Charles' realm. The original task of the delegates was to revise the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, but following the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant, this assembly moved toward a more specific and exacting task of framing theological and ecclesiastical formulae which would bring the Church of England into conformity with the doctrine and practice of the presbyterian Church of Scotland.

The various documents composed by the assembly proceeded through a process of committee work in the afternoons, followed by plenary discussion on the floor of the Assembly in the mornings, with regular additional gatherings for worship, fast days, and the like. Despite disagreements, the divines produced one of the truly monumental documents of church history that has instructed, directed, and profoundly influenced Presbyterian churches worldwide ever since. The Confession of Faith, along with the Shorter Catechism, has influenced Presbyterianism even more profoundly than has Calvin's Institutes.

The Westminster Confession of Faith represents a high point in the development of federal theology, and its inner dynamic is powerfully covenantal. Divided into thirty-three chapters, it carefully covers the whole range of Christian doctrine, beginning with Scripture as the source of knowledge of divine things (in the same manner as the First and Second Helvetic Confession, the Formula of Concord, and the Irish Articles). It continues with an exposition of God and His decrees, creation, providence, and the fall (II-VI) before turning to expound the covenant of grace, the work of Christ, and, at length, the application of redemption (VII-XVIII). Careful attention is given under various chapter headings to questions of law and liberty, to the doctrine of the church and sacraments (XXV-XXIX), and to the last things (XXXII-XXXIII).

While the Confession was composed by disciplined theological minds, it also displays the influence of men with deep pastoral and preaching experience. It is an outstanding expression of classical Reformed theology framed for the needs of the people of God.

Historical place

What is the place of The Westminster Confession of Faith in history? On one level, it must be regarded as a failed experiment. The uniformity of doctrine, worship, and polity desired in the Solemn League and Covenant for the churches of England, Scotland, and Ireland proved to be unattainable. The restoration of the monarchy under King Charles II in fact set the tide running in the opposite direction. The Thirty-Nine Articles were left untouched to stand as the confessional statement of the Church of England. The Book of Common Prayer was republished and its use in public worship was made compulsory. The diocesan episcopate, in its fully-elaborated medieval form, was reinstated. The work of the Westminster divines was simply cast aside.

The result was very different in Scotland. The Church of Scotland warmly embraced the Westminster Standards, major and minor. Only one exception was registered, in regard to the provision of the Confession (Ch. XXXI, Sec. II) giving the civil magistrate power to call synods. Otherwise it was the judgment of the General Assembly that the Westminster Standards well and truly represented the faith, worship, and government of the Scottish national church.
Charles’ success in restoring the status quo ante bellum in the Church of England encouraged him to launch a similar effort in Scotland. The nation rose up in defense of the "covenanted attainments" of the Scottish Reformation. For more than twenty years, agents of the king roamed the land persecuting and killing the Covenanters. As many as 18,000 Scots died for their faith. At times armies clashed on the field of battle, but at no time did Charles gain any ground in his quest to Anglicanize the Scottish church.

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 marked the end of all such efforts. Under a new king, William of Orange, the Scots secured forever the right to maintain the doctrine, worship, and polity of the Westminster Standards in their national church. Scottish emigration and missionary work carried those Standards to every part of the world. Great national bodies grew from small beginnings in North America, India, Australia, and elsewhere. In every case, these “daughter churches” received and adopted the doctrinal standards of the "mother church," thus making the Westminster Standards one of the most important spiritual and cultural products given by Scotland to the world.

Down to the last decades of the nineteenth century, there was no serious challenge to the supremacy of the Westminster Standards in the Church of Scotland or in any of her daughters overseas. Even the Secession of 1733 only served to intensify devotion to these Standards, both in the continuing Church of Scotland and among the Seceders of the Associate Synod.

Crosscurrents began to move in these waters at that time however, and soon efforts were made to modify or even supplant The Westminster Confession of Faith. Objections were now heard against what was perceived as a too-stringent determinism, or a "persecuting principle" vesting the civil power with the duty to suppress heresy and punish heretics.

In Scotland, various bodies took in hand "Declaratory Acts" imposing a particular meaning on the words of the Confession of Faith at various points to the exclusion of what were held to be erroneous interpretations. The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. adopted a similar Declaratory Act and added new chapters to the Confession of Faith in an effort to woo anti-Calvinist dissenters back into her fold.

Staunch Calvinists such as Benjamin B. Warfield of Princeton harshly critiqued such efforts, and labored to show that such modifications were ill-considered, unnecessary, and even deceptive. Nonetheless, the efforts to modify the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession found favor with many Presbyterians. Their thinking was influenced by popular Arminian revivalists such as Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday, or by scholars and churchmen caught in the powerful grip of the Modernism of the times.

Smaller bodies with a reputation for orthodoxy and attachment to their Scottish heritage also grew restive under the burden of Westminster. Reformed Presbyterians evolved a "Testimony" fully as long as the Confession of Faith, to supplement it as a statement of their distinctive beliefs. In 1925, the United Presbyterian Church of North America adopted a new "Confessional Statement" offered as a substitute for her historic 18-point "Testimony" of 1858, but in reality, it was a theologically streamlined and devalued replacement for The Westminster Confession of Faith.

Union discussions among various Presbyterian bodies in the United States induced Southern bodies such as the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church to adopt revisions of the Standards identical to or similar to those adopted in the PCUSA. The goal was to remove any confessional obstacle to the merger of these various groups into one denomination.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, a new way was found to solve any perceived problems with the Westminster Standards for contemporary Presbyterians. The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. produced a new Book of Confessions. The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter Catechism were two of a number of such documents culled from church history and arranged in album format as a kind of museum of the history of doctrine. The collection was crowned with a new item known as the "Confession of 1967."
This new device enabled the UPCUSA to affirm the *Westminster Standards* as part of her history without binding her ministers and elders to anything taught or commanded in them. This marked the end of the influence of *The Westminster Confession* as a living force in America's largest body of Presbyterians.

Other groups were emerging from the wreckage of the older Presbyterian bodies in America during this period. All tended toward conservatism, and all declared their adherence to the *Westminster Standards*: the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936), the Bible Presbyterian Church (1937), the Presbyterian Church in America (1973), and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (1981).

It is open to question whether these newer denominations adhere to the *Westminster Standards* without reservation, exception, or modification. Certainly many members of these churches are ignorant of or antagonistic toward the doctrine and worship set forth in these *Standards*. It is remarkable, nonetheless, that as a new century begins, these *Standards* retain their pride of place as doctrinal standards and benchmarks for America's Presbyterians.

The growth and vitality of these newer denominations suggest that the *Westminster Standards* will be with us for many more years. There are also encouraging signs that the younger students and ministers of these denominations have a growing attachment to these *Standards*.

The *Westminster Standards* still shine as a beacon of faith for many in Scotland and Northern Ireland. There are several small bodies of Presbyterians, and a significant wing of conservative evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, who adhere firmly to the *Westminster Standards*.

New groups of Presbyterians have emerged in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to keep alive the faith and testimony of *Westminster* in those lands. Mission work has planted this same testimony in Asia, most notably in South Korea, but also in Japan, China, India, Singapore, and elsewhere. Nor is Africa without a growing number of Presbyterian churches zealous for *Westminster*.

Many of the *Westminster* divines suffered greatly for their faith. Cast out of their churches and officially silenced by King Charles in 1662, they labored as best they could in England, despised as Non-Conformists. They accepted their lot because they believed deeply in the Biblical truths summarized and set forth in the *Westminster Standards*. It would be no surprise to the divines that the past 350 years have not removed these *Standards* from their place in the life and work of today's churches. They would see this only as confirmation of the truth of God's Word "*which liveth and abideth forever*" (1 Peter 1:23).

**Evaluation**

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* excels in numerous areas. Notable elements are these:

1. It's bearing a systematic design built upon the two "principia" of Scripture and the triune God. I believe that *The Westminster Confession of Faith* itself, though not a scholastic system, could not have been written apart from the intellectual background of Protestant Scholasticism, which contributes significantly to the Confession's well-known thoroughness, precision, and balance;

2. Its opening chapter on Scripture, which B.B. Warfield said was the best single chapter in any Protestant confession;

3. Its mature formulation of the Reformed doctrine of predestination (III, V, IX, XVII). The *Confession* contains more supralapsarian accents than previous Reformed confessions, but continues the basic infralapsarian approach of the confessional Reformed tradition. Thus, though remaining wisely noncommittal on the debate between supra- and infralapsarianism, it teaches clearly that God's will is the ultimate cause of all things, including human salvation. It teaches the doctrine of reprobation unequivocally, but in guarded terms (III, 7-8), being careful to balance this teaching with a chapter on human freedom (IX);
4. Its emphasis on covenants as the way in which God relates to His people through history is particularly noteworthy (especially VII). The *Confession* offers the first major Reformed confessional exposition of the two covenant schema — the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. *Westminster*’s covenant theology is a development within consistent Reformed theology — not a modification or distortion of Calvinism as some scholars have recently argued;

5. Its doctrine of redemption structured according to God's acts (X-XIII) and human response (XIV-XVII), thus underscoring its "covenantal" balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility;

6. Its Puritan chapters on the doctrines of adoption (XII) and assurance (XVIII) were unique among Reformed confessions. While criticism is sometimes voiced that the *Confession* is a deeply scholastic document (e.g., it has no separate chapter on the Holy Spirit), it is interesting to note that it is the first Reformed confession to have a separate chapter on adoption — perhaps the least scholastic of all doctrines. Moreover, no Reformed confession had shown such sensitivity to the subjective difficulties believers have in maintaining a conscious, healthy degree of assurance;

7. Its strong affirmation of the law of God as perpetually binding the conscience of the believer, even though certain ceremonial and civil statutes are no longer in effect (XIX), balanced by a careful formulation of the nature of Christian liberty of conscience (XX);

8. Its Puritan view of the Sabbath (XXI), affirming the day as a perpetual obligation more strongly than some continental Reformed writings;

9. Its confessional inclusion of the standard Reformed position of allowing divorce and remarriage only on the biblical grounds of adultery (XXI, 5);

10. Its confessional distinction between the visible and invisible church (XXV) is more clearly developed than in any prior Reformed confession.

**Conclusion**

*The Westminster Confession of Faith* stands at the peak of a great development of English Reformed theology and represents a developed covenant theology that is true to Scripture and flows inherently out of the Reformed system of doctrine. It represents the best of Puritan scholarship, blended with Scottish theological sagacity. Its greatest drawback is its lack of the *Heidelberg Catechism*’s devotional warmth and “personalness” which, in our continental Reformed tradition, we have come to deeply treasure. Ultimately, both the precise Reformed declarations of the *Westminster Confession* and the devotional Reformed statements of the *Heidelberg Catechism* are needed, for they mutually enrich our biblical, Reformed heritage.

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