

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 65

Westminster Confession of Faith

This week, with thanks to Scott Riling for filling in on the oral presentation, we will spend time with the Westminster Confession of Faith. This historic document became the bedrock for the Presbyterian Church. We will place it within its historical context and then discuss several significant ways it espouses theological concepts.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To understand the Westminster Confession of Faith in its historical context, we need to study two converging rivers, Protestant Church History and British history. The Protestant Church history centers on the early to mid-1600's. At this point in England, there are two main strands of Christian faith, Catholic and Calvinistic Protestantism. We can recall from the lesson on the Church of England and the Anglican Separation (see lesson 60) that England went through a period of pendulum swings from Roman Catholicism through an Anglicanized Catholicism to rabid Protestantism, back to Roman Catholicism before finally resting upon a middle ground that ultimately becomes Episcopalian. During these swings, when the crown and religious power was in the Roman Catholic camp, many English Protestants moved to Geneva to live, study, and worship. Geneva, of course, was the center of Calvin's influence and teaching. Once these Protestants were freed to return to England, they came with strong Calvinistic precepts and beliefs.

One of the key British people to go to Geneva during this period was a Scottish man named John Knox. Knox learned at the feet of Calvin and others before returning to Scotland. Once back in Scotland, Knox oversaw the Church of Scotland's adoption of Calvinism. Scotland became a Presbyterian state, somewhat at odds with the Church of England. England is geographically between Scotland and Rome, and it soon found itself theologically the same – between Scotland's Protestantism and Rome's Catholicism. This theological middle ground, however, continued to face tension from both sides.

In England proper during the later 1500's and especially into the 1600's, the Protestant movement had a range of supporters. There were the hard core Calvinists like we have studied in lessons 58, 59, and 64, but there was also an Arminian presence (see lesson 64). The Church of England itself was internally fractured along some of these lines.

The hard core Calvinists were strict in their religious practices and piety. Because of this strictness, many of them went by the label of “Puritans,” a reference to the purity of their religion and life. They took adamant stands against many of the traditions and practices of both the Catholic Church and the Church of England. Many eschewed Christmas and Easter as Catholic holidays (“holy-days”) which had no reference point in Scripture.

If we shift our focus from the Protestant River to the Political River, we pick up our history with the reign of King James I (see lesson 61). To his historical credit, James put out the Authorized Version of the English Bible. On a personal level, however, his life was a bit more out of sorts with normal religious practice. James’s homosexual dalliances and other ruling and lifestyle habits left the religious public less than wowed at the life of the head of the Church of England.

James was King, but the King of England did not have absolute power. Since the Magna Carta (1215¹), England had an assembly that had certain law making powers. Over time, this assembly became known as “Parliament.” By the time of James, Parliament was the only body authorized to assess common taxes in England. That was the great hammer Parliament held over the King. There was a great deal of tension between Parliament and the King. The King wanted absolute power; Parliament wanted much the same. The main power the King had was the authority to either call a Parliament into session or the power to dissolve Parliament. Once Parliament was dissolved, it could not meet again until the King recalled it into session. Of course, once his money ran out, the King had few choices other than calling a Parliamentary session.

By the 1600’s, Parliament was heavily populated with Calvinists. The King was responsible for the Church of England, and not surprisingly, it was filled with loyalists to the crown. The tension between King and Parliament ran deep beyond politics into religion. It placed Parliament at odds with both King and the Anglican Church.

Because Parliament was loaded with anti-Catholic Calvinists, many members feared that James was too close to the Catholic Church. While Elizabeth had forged a middle ground between Catholicism and Calvinism, James seemed to many to be pushing the Church of England closer and closer to Catholicism. Since Bloody Mary (see lesson 60), Parliament passed a number of laws to stamp out Catholicism. For example, anyone who refused to attend Anglican services was fined 20 pounds a month (a HUGE sum at that time). During this time, England constantly feared a strong rebellious undercurrent of Catholic strife that

¹ The Magna Carta was reissued multiple times with certain changes and edits over the years. Most kings of England have acknowledged the 1225 version.

threatened both government and church. Guy Fawkes' (a Catholic) attempt to detonate gunpowder under Parliament was one of many examples of actions that furthered these fears. Laws forbidding Catholics to appear at court or live within ten miles of London were easily and quickly passed out of Parliament.

Once James died, the crown passed to his son, Charles I (described as “grave, slow in thought and, owing to a speech impediment, no less slow in conversation”²). Charles appointed William Laud as the new Archbishop of Canterbury. Laud was strongly anti-Calvinist. In theology, he was an Arminian (see lesson 64); in practice he was “high church.” He instituted many practices of tradition and formality that seemed Catholic to the Protestants. Laud was bent on wiping out Puritanism. He oversaw the arrest, torture, and even execution of many Puritans.

The distrust of Parliament and many of the people grew as Charles dallied with the great Catholic power Spain (a historic enemy of the British) trying to bring Spanish forces to England to reinforce his reign. To pull this off, Charles would have to commit family and country to reversals in the anti-Catholic laws and policies. This did not sit well with the British Protestants. For over ten years, there was a struggle for authority between Charles and Parliament.

During these religiously turbulent times, many British citizens who wanted religious freedom found it by leaving! But, the place to go was no longer Geneva. True religious freedom was to be found in the British settlements so far from the crown that religious oversight from England was ineffective. These folks immigrated to the New World...to America!

In 1620, a number of Calvinist/Puritans set sail on the Mayflower landing at Plymouth Rock. Over the next 15 years, as many as 5,000 more Puritans would settle Massachusetts. During the persecutions of Archbishop Laud, as many as 30,000 Puritans left England for America. Because of the harsh anti-Catholic penalties, Lord Baltimore led a number of Catholics to establish a Catholic colony call Maryland (named in honor of Henrietta Maria, the Queen of Charles I³).

Laud and Charles were not satisfied with tackling the English for their religious reforms, they also went into Scotland to eliminate the Calvinist/Presbyterian practices and bring the Scottish church into alignment with the Church of England. The Scots, like the English Puritans, prayed extemporaneous prayers as opposed to

² Rebecca Fraser, *The Story of Britain*, (Norton & Company: New York 2003), p. 327.

³ The Queen was French by birth. She was raised a Catholic, and upon her marriage into the British royal family in 1625, maintained her Catholic practices. Undoubtedly, this fed the Puritan concerns that Charles was taking England back to Rome and away from Protestantism.

formal ritual prayers found in the Anglican prayer book. It was this prayer book that Laud and Charles sought to enforce on the Scottish church.

Now, if we consider how upset some of our folks (maybe even us?) get over “innovations” in a church service, we might still raise an eyebrow when we hear of the first service in Edinburgh, Scotland where the prayer book stripped the congregants of extemporaneous prayer. The year was 1637, and at the first reading, a woman named Jenny Geddes stood up, grabbed her footstool, and threw it at the reader in St. Giles Cathedral. Geddes became a national hero!

The Scottish church as a whole met in assembly and voted to oust the Bishops placed by Charles and Laud over the Scottish Church. Rather than Bishops, the Assembly confirmed the Presbyterian approach of elders overseeing a Protestant/Calvinist church. Charles tried to war with the Scots over the issue, but without Parliament to raise tax money for the war (Charles was refusing to call a Parliament), Charles was ill equipped to raise an army sufficient to win. The Scots trounced Charles and forced him to recognize their religious liberties as well as pay reparations. As a result, Charles had to call a Parliament which promptly set about pushing their own agenda.

Ultimately, Parliament deposed King Charles and beheaded him. In the process, Parliament called an assembly at Westminster to draft a paper that would more closely bring the Church of England into alignment with the Church of Scotland. That paper was the Westminster Confession of Faith.

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

From 1643 to 1646 while England was fighting a civil war, the Westminster Assembly met at Westminster Abbey to write the Westminster Standards. These men were Calvinist scholars, churchmen, and theologians from throughout England and Scotland. Through their meetings with Parliament and their internal conferences, they prepared and passed what was labeled *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. They prepared a *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms* as well as a *Directory of Worship*. Those documents, in slightly edited form, outlasted the political imperative of Presbyterianism in England. When the monarchy returned to England in 1660, the Church of England rapidly transitioned back to its Anglican form and the *Westminster Confession* was ruled null in its force.

Still, the Westminster Confession lived on and became the source document for the Presbyterian Church both in theology and Church government. The document reflects the strong Calvinist doctrine in opposition to the Arminian theology embraced by many Anglicans at that time. Today’s Presbyterian church evidences

several historical schisms since the 1600's that have resulted in some modifying the Confession, some disavowing it, and others wholeheartedly following it.⁴

If we examine the Confession, then we find it gives us a good snap shot of Protestant Calvinism in the 17th century. While those who are not Calvinists will disagree with those aspects that espouse the teachings discussed in the last few lesson (for example, predestination), there is much that Catholics and Protestants of many denominations will find to be wonderful explanations of faith. In this class, recognizing the time already spent on peculiar doctrines of Calvinism, we will focus on some of the other parts of the Confession that merit attention.

The Confession is divided into 25 chapters. They cover issues of Scripture, God, creation, the fall, free will, the atonement, marriage and divorce, worship as well as church government and much more. One can access the Confession on the Internet at www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/.

The Confession's notes on Scripture are strong. After setting out the fact that God is revealed by nature so that men are without excuse, the Confession goes on to say that God has chosen to give humanity a clearer and more thorough revelation that better preserves and propagates the truth of his himself and his work in Christ. The Confession sets out the specific books of Protestant scripture setting the apocrypha not suitable for scripture and not for use beyond that of "other human writings." Scripture is "infallible" with God as its author. Even though it is infallible, the Spirit is still necessary for human understanding of scripture. In scripture, we have "all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life."

Of God, the confession specifies:

⁴ American Presbyterians trace their roots to British colonization in the 1600's. In 1706, a number of Presbyterian churches united to form the first American Presbytery. By 1716, the first Synod met in Philadelphia. The Synod met again in Philadelphia in 1729 and passed a requirement that all ministers declare an approval of the Westminster Confession as a doctrinal statement. There was a compromise reached on aspects of the Confession that were deemed "non-essential" on which ministers could differ. After the American War of Independence, the American Presbyterians rewrote part of the Confession to reject the relationship between church and state that was in the original Confession. It also took out the reference to the pope as the antichrist. In 1903, the northern Presbyterian churches ("Presbyterian Church of the United States" or "PCUSA") revised the Confession further to soften the strong Calvinism. The southern Presbyterian Church ("PCUS") broke off from the PCUSA over these changes. In 1910, PCUSA conflicts over other aspects of the Confession ultimately led to another division over issues. As late as 1973, the Presbyterian Church in America formed over efforts to embrace greater portions of the original Westminster Confession.

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.

God has all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He has made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and has most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleases. In His sight all things are open and manifest, His knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to Him contingent, or uncertain. He is most holy in all His counsels, in all His works, and in all His commands. To Him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience He is pleased to require of them.

In the unity of the Godhead there be three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

From this, one can readily see that the Confession has parts that beautifully and articulately express core convictions and doctrines of the faith.

The entire confession could easily become a study source for understanding key Biblical doctrines. For example, on the doctrine of the fall of man, the Confession writes:

Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptations of Satan, sinned, in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin, God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to His own glory.

By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion, with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body.

They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed; and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.

From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.

This corruption of nature, during this life, does remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin.

Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, does in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.

On the issue of justification (salvation before God), one can readily perceive the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith, but in a Calvinist sense of election. Chapter 11 reads:

Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love.

Christ, by His obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real and full satisfaction to His Father's justice in their behalf. Yet, in as much as He was given by the

Father for them; and His obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead; and both, freely, not for any thing in them; their justification is only of free grace; that both the exact justice, and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.

God does continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.

The justification of believers under the Old Testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the New Testament.

Of those saved, the Confession sets out the life lived by faith as one where:

The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.

By this faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory: growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

While one could spend weeks going through these sections and providing the scriptural support, we would be leaving the spirit of our Church History Literacy. Instead, I have asked Scott to pick out a few of his favorite ideas from the confessions and use them to illustrate his points for home. To make this written lesson complete in itself, I add the following points for home.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. God has always worked his revelation and message through events in history. God was quick to use foreign powers to invade Israel when the Jews needed motivation and direction. In fact, many of the Old Testament books of prophecies were directly linked to the threats and invasions of foreign powers. It should come as no surprise that in post-Biblical history, God has continued to work in secular events weaving threads of his church into a fabric we live in today. God can use a stick in the hands of Moses to free the Jews from captivity. Should we be surprised that he can use the civil war of a country seeking political domination to his purposes? Of course not! But, then we get to the personal aspect of this point. For while we all live the history of the world on a large stage, we also live the history of our own closer circle of family and friends...of our lives. God is no less interested in us and no less powerful to produce his righteous story. He has numbered the hairs on our heads (Mt 10:30, Lk 12:7). He knows when a sparrow falls (Mt 10:29). He is in control.
2. God is beyond our comprehension, but to spend time in contemplation of his grandeur provides a source not only of worship, but strength in the Christian walk. Let us all commit to spending regular time thinking through how great and marvelous our God is. Consider Isaiah 6, Isaiah sees God enthroned among the angels. "I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple." His reaction is one that leads to his own purification ("they [the angels] were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is filled with his glory'... 'Woe to me!' I cried... Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal... from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said... 'your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'"). After this experience, Isaiah finds the strength to go forth for God and his cause (Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send?' ...and I said, 'Here am I. Send me!").