

# The Importance and Relevance of the Westminster Confession of Faith

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by John Murray

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The Westminster Assembly was called by ordinance of both Houses of Parliament and met for the first time on July 1, 1643. Nearly all the sessions were held in the Jerusalem Chamber in Westminster Abbey.

The first work which the Assembly undertook was the revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. On October 12, 1643, when the Assembly was engaged in the revision of the sixteenth Article, there came an order from both Houses of Parliament to treat of such discipline and government as would be most agreeable to God's Word, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the Church at home and nearer agreement with the Church of Scotland and other Reformed Churches abroad, and also to treat of a directory for worship. It was in pursuance of this order that the Assembly prepared what are known as "The Form of Presbyterial Church Government" and "The Directory for the Public Worship of God".

On August 20, 1644, a committee was appointed by the Assembly to prepare matter for a Confession of Faith. A great deal of the attention of the Assembly was devoted to this Confession during the years 1645 and 1646. It was not until December 4, 1646, that the text of the Confession was completed and presented to both Houses of Parliament as the "humble advice" of the divines. This did not, however, include the proof texts. These were not presented to the Houses until April 29, 1647.

The amount of work and time expended on the Confession of Faith will stagger us in these days of haste and alleged activism. But the influence exerted all over the world by the Confession can only be understood in the light of the diligent care and prayerful devotion exercised in its composition.

The Westminster Confession is the last of the great Reformation creeds. We should expect, therefore, that it would exhibit distinctive features. The Westminster Assembly had the advantage of more than a century of Protestant credal formulation. Reformed theology had by the 1640's attained to a maturity that could not be expected a hundred or even seventy-five years earlier. Controversies had developed in the interval between the death of Calvin, for example, and the Westminster Assembly, that compelled theologians to give to Reformed doctrine fuller and more precise definition. In many circles today there is the tendency to depreciate, if not deplore, the finesse of theological definition which the Confession exemplifies. This is an attitude to be depreciated. A growing faith grounded in

the perfection and finality of Scripture requires increasing particularity and cannot consist with the generalities that make room for error. No creed of the Christian Church is comparable to that of Westminster in respect of the skill with which the fruits of fifteen centuries of Christian thought have been preserved, and at the same time examined anew and clarified in the light of that fuller understanding of God's Word which the Holy Spirit has imparted.

The Westminster Confession was the work of devoted men and the fruit of painstaking, consecrated labour. But it was still the work of fallible men. For that reason it must not be esteemed as sacrosanct and placed in the same category as the Bible. The latter is the only infallible rule of faith and life. The framers of the Confession were careful to remind us of this. "All synods or councils since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as an help in both." (XXXI, iv). It is not superfluous to take note of this reminder. We are still under the necessity of avoiding the Romish error. One of the most eloquent statements of the Confession is that of I, vi: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men."

In the category to which the Confession belongs, it has no peer. No chapter in the Confession evinces this assessment more than that which the framers chose for good and obvious reasons to place at the beginning - "Of the Holy Scripture". In the whole field of formulation respecting the doctrine of Scripture nothing is comparable to that which we find in these ten sections. With the most recent deviations from biblical doctrine in mind, it is as if this chapter had been drawn up but yesterday in order to controvert them. Section i, for example, is so carefully constructed that, if chronology were forgotten, we might think that what is being guarded is the doctrine that Scripture itself is the revelatory Word of God in opposition to the present-day dialectical theology which regards it as merely the witness to revelation. When the Confession says, "Therefore it pleased the Lord. . . to commit the same wholly unto writing", what is in view as committed wholly to writing is God's *self-revelation* and *the declaration of his will unto his church*. And so in the next section we find that Holy Scripture is stated to be synonymous with, or defined in terms of "the Word of God written".

Again, the distinction drawn so clearly between the ground upon which the *authority* of Scripture rests (section iv) and the way by which this authority is attested to us (section v) is one exactly framed to meet a current error. Those influenced by this error who aver that the Confession teaches that the authority of Scripture is derived from the "inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts" (section v) have failed to pay attention to what is elementary in the sequence of these two sections. The authority rests

upon the fact that God is the author of Scripture; it is *our* full persuasion and assurance that is derived from the internal testimony of the Spirit. The Confession could not have been more explicit in setting forth this distinction. Thereby it has given direction for all proper thinking on the question of authority.

One of the most controversial chapters in the Confession is the third, "Of God's Eternal Decree". The development of this chapter and the finesse of formulation are masterful. There are three subjects dealt with, the decree of God in its cosmic dimensions, the decree of God as it respects men and angels, and the decree of God as it respects men. In connection with the first, the all-inclusiveness of the decree, embracing sin itself, is asserted, but with equal emphasis also that "God is not the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures" (section i). In connection with angels and men, the statement most offensive to critics is that some are "foreordained to everlasting death" (section iii). What is too frequently overlooked is that this statement, as it has respect to men, is explicated more fully in section vii. Here the doctrine, often called that of reprobation, is analysed as to its elements in a way unsurpassed in the whole compass of theological literature. Nowhere else in so few words is this delicate topic handled with such meticulous care and discrimination. The concluding section (viii) places the "high mystery of predestination" in proper perspective in relation to human responsibility and the comfort to be derived from it for all those who sincerely obey the gospel. Sovereign election of grace is not alien to the gospel. It is a tenet of the gospel, and the fount from which the gospel flows, as well as the guarantee that the gospel will not fail of its purpose.

All true theology is realistic; it takes the data of revelation and the facts of life seriously. At no point does a theology governed by sentiment rather than by facts quibble with the teaching of Scripture more than on the subject of sin. The Confession is not afraid to enunciate the doctrine of total depravity, and thus it says unequivocally that by original corruption "we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil" (VI, iv). Less than this is not a true transcript of the biblical teaching that there is none that doeth good, no, not even one, that the imagination of the thought of man's heart is only evil continually, and that the carnal mind is enmity against God. The severity of the Scripture's indictment, reflected in the Confessional teaching, is complementary to the radical concept of grace which the Confession entertains. However necessary it is to be true to the data of Scripture and the facts of life on the doctrine of depravity, this would only seal despair, were it not that grace is as thorough as sin is total. Herein lies the grandeur of sovereign grace. "Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love" (III, v).

It is this theme of sovereign grace and love that the Confession pursues and unfolds in its various aspects. One of the most remarkable chapters for fulness of doctrine and condensation of expression is "Of Christ the Mediator" (VIII). The whole doctrine of the person of Christ, of his finished work and continued ministry is set forth. If we are thinking of Chalcedon and the doctrine then formulated, nothing is more adequate or succinct than "that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion" (VIII, ii). If we are thinking of the atonement in both its nature and design, what in so few words could be more inclusive than: "The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience, and sacrifice of himself, which he, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up to God, 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 unto him"? (VIII, v).

When the Confession deals with the application of redemption, it is noteworthy how the various topics are arranged. It sets forth first the phases which are the actions of God - Calling, Justification, Adoption, Sanctification (X-XIII) - and then those which are concerned with human response - Faith, Repentance, Good Works, Perseverance, Assurance of Grace (XIV-XVIII). Undoubtedly, the consideration that salvation is of the Lord and that all saving response in men is the fruit of God's grace dictated this order. It is consonant with the pervasive emphasis upon the sovereignty of grace.

That the application should be regarded as having its inception in effectual calling should not be overlooked. This is where Scripture places it, and it is rightly conceived of as an efficacious translation out of a state of sin and death into one of grace and salvation by Jesus Christ. Calling is not to be defined in terms of human response. The latter is the *answer* to the call. This perspective in the Confession needs to be appreciated - effectual calling is an act of God and of God alone. There is, however, one shortcoming in the definition the Confession provides. Calling is specifically the action of God the Father and this accent does not appear in the Confession.

[ED: Professor Murray bases this statement on his exposition of Rom 8:29,30 - that the One who called is the same One who predestinated them to be conformed to the image of his Son. It is therefore the Father's specific work to predestinate and to call.]

In the two Catechisms produced by the Westminster Assembly, it is striking to observe how large a proportion is devoted to the exposition of the ten commandments. This shows how jealous the divines were in the matter of the Christian life. A similar proportion is not devoted to the law of God in the Confession. But the emphasis is proportionate to what a Confession should incorporate. It is well to note what is said about good works (XVI), the law of God (XIX), Christian liberty (XX), the Sabbath day (XXI), marriage and divorce (XXIV). Grace has often been turned into license. No creed guards against this distortion more than the Confession of the Westminster Assembly. Grace pure and sovereign is the theme

throughout. But grace is unto holiness, and it confirms and enhances human responsibility. "The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof. . . Neither doth Christ in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation." (XIX, v).

In days of increasing encroachment upon the liberties which are God-given, the charter of liberty needs again to be resounded: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are, in any thing, contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship." (XX, ii). And when the church thinks that the modes of worship are a matter of human discretion, we need to be recalled to the regulative principle that "the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture." (XXI, i). Or, when the sacred ties of matrimony are lightly regarded and even desecrated, what could be more relevant than the principles and restrictions enunciated in chapter XXIV?

The flabby sentimentality so widespread is not hospitable to the rigour and vigour of a document like the Confession. Its system of truth and way of life do not comport with current patterns of thought and behaviour. This is the reason for the collapse of the religious and moral standards which our Christian faith represents. It is folly to think that we can retain or reclaim Christian culture on any lower level than that which the Westminster Assembly defined. Christian thought may never be stagnant. When it ceases to be progressive, it declines. But we do not make progress by discarding our heritage. We build upon it or, more accurately, we grow from it.

Oftentimes it is pleaded that the Christian message must be adapted to the modern man. It is true that the message must be proclaimed to modern man, and to modern man in the context in which he lives and in a language he can understand. But it is much more true and important to plead that modern man must be adapted to the gospel. It is not true that the doctrine of the Confession is irrelevant to the modern man. It is indeed meaningless to him until he listens to it. But when a man today becomes earnest about the Christian faith, when he gives heed to Scripture as the Word of God, when he faces up to the challenge of unbelieving ways of thought and life and demands the answer which Christianity provides, he cannot rest with anything less than the consistency and vigour which the Confession exemplifies. Unbelief is potent and subtle, and the believer requires the truth of God in its fullest expression if he is to be furnished to faithful witness and confession.

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