

THE WESTMINSTER
CONFESSION OF FAITH

THE CONFESSION OF FAITH;

AGREED UPON BY THE ASSEMBLY OF DIVINES AT WESTMINSTER, WITH THE
ASSISTANCE OF COMMISSIONERS FROM THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND,
AS PART OF THE COVENANTED UNIFORMITY IN RELIGION
BETWIXT THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE KINGDOMS
OF SCOTLAND, ENGLAND, AND IRELAND.

APPROVED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY 1647, AND RATIFIED AND ESTABLISHED
BY ACTS OF PARLIAMENT 1649 AND 1690, AS THE PUBLICK AND AVOWED
CONFESSION OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND,

WITH

THE PROOFS FROM THE SCRIPTURE.



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST
3 Murrayfield Road, Edinburgh EH12 6EL, UK
P.O. Box 621, Carlisle, PA 17013, USA

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This edition contains the Westminster Confession of Faith as approved by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1647. It also includes Chapters 20, 23, 31, as altered, amended, and adopted as the Doctrinal Part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1788. Additional footnotes have been inserted at Chapters 22.III, 24.IV, and 25.VI, to indicate other places where the Confession has been altered in the editions adopted by the OPC and the PCA.

INTRODUCTION

AS THE ministers and laymen named in an Ordinance of the Lords and Commons of the English Parliament assembled in Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster Abbey on July 1, 1643 they had no idea of the worldwide significance of the work in which they were about to engage. Summoned by Parliament (contrary to King Charles I's wishes) their stated task was to bring the Church of England into closer theological and liturgical conformity to the churches of the continent of Europe and especially the Church of Scotland.

What in fact they produced—including the *Confession of Faith*, the *Larger Catechism* and the *Shorter Catechism*—would, in the event, make little impression on the Church of England. But it was destined to shape and form not only the Church of Scotland but the character of churches and the lives of countless individuals from Latin America to

South Korea and from Manhattan to Melbourne. Almost certainly—and remarkably—the influence especially of the *Confession of Faith* and the *Shorter Catechism* is more widespread and pervasive today, in the early twenty-first century, than ever before. This attractive edition of the *Confession of Faith* is a fitting commemoration of that and marks the three hundred and seventieth anniversary of the calling of the Assembly.

Few readers today would be able to guess that the *Confession* was written against a background of the musket smoke of Civil War, of King against Parliament, and simultaneously with the rise of Oliver Cromwell and his remarkable New Model Army. Yet apart from that context it would never have been written, certainly not in its present form. For the Assembly was convened essentially as a Parliamentary Advisory Commission, its members being chosen by the Parliament of England. What was in view was simply the further reformation of the English Church.

The men selected for the Assembly were a representative group: one hundred and twenty ministers

(‘Divines’) and thirty laymen, chosen in pairs from the various English counties. They were broad in their ecclesiastical orientation—Presbyterians of various stripes, Episcopalians, and Independents. They were varied too in their theological convictions. Many of them were working pastors, some of them academics. A number of them spoke frequently and were gifted in theological debate; others spoke infrequently; and some perhaps never spoke in the plenary sessions with which each day began.

Shortly after its inaugural meeting in July 1643, the Assembly set to the task of revising the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England. Their work showed every sign of being completed well within a period of nine months or so. But the issues of the Civil War gave their task a dramatic turn.

In September 1643 the Solemn League and Covenant between England and Scotland was signed. From the English point of view it functioned as a bargaining tool to bring the Scots (and in particular their army) to the support of the parliamentary cause. From the viewpoint of the Scottish

Presbyterians this was an unparalleled opportunity to bring their influence to bear on the reformation of the Church of England.

Two things resulted.

The first was the radical change in direction of the Assembly's task—now what was needed was not a mere revision of the Anglican articles but a new Confession of Faith altogether.

Secondly, the new arrangement necessitated the presence of Scottish representatives at the Assembly. The Church of Scotland insisted on sending both ministers and elders—anything less would be un-Presbyterian; some of its most able ministers were deputed—Alexander Henderson, whom many thought to be the greatest man of his time; Samuel Rutherford, seraphic in correspondence and relentless in logic; the young George Gillespie, skilled debater, as well as others (thankfully including the inveterate correspondent and commentator Robert Baillie, whose *Letters and Journals* provide interesting sidelights on the events).

Shrewdly the Scots refused to become members of the Assembly and remained 'Commissioners'

from their Church, thus virtually insuring that they would function as an informal committee with veto powers. After all, the documents produced by the Assembly now needed to be acceptable to the Scots. How little they could have imagined the fruit that would be borne from their journeys south to London (on one occasion the military situation required that they sail to London, and apologizing for their late arrival they cited the fact that they had to sail *via* the continent in order to arrive at all!). Nor could they have imagined that when the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland approved the *Confession of Faith* in 1647, a chain of influence was established that would transform it into the internationally influential document it became.

But what of the *Confession* itself?

Theologically it gives expression to what we might call ‘Catholic Calvinism’.

It is ‘Catholic’ (literally meaning ‘throughout the whole world’) in the sense that it stands on the shoulders of the great Creeds of the Christian Church. Its expositions of the doctrine of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ are simply echoes

of the Apostles' and Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds and the Formula of Chalcedon.

It is 'Calvinism' in the sense that it finds its roots in and is influenced by the kind of biblical and theological perspective expressed in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In this context the *Confession's* soteriology (its understanding of the way of salvation and the nature of the Christian life) is deeply rooted in Christ; salvation is seen as a gift from God that becomes ours through faith in Christ and leads to a life devoted to the glory of God. Indeed in some areas (assurance for example) where the *Confession* has been accused of differing from Calvin it is not difficult to demonstrate how much it actually echoes the truths he had discovered by his careful exposition of Scripture.

It is important to remember who the authors of the *Confession of Faith* were. Some of them were distinguished academics of various disciplines. But most of the members of the Assembly were working pastors, or theologians who believed that the goal of theology is practical—to enable us to live well for God's glory. Among them were great

preachers, such as Stephen Marshall, able theologians like William Twisse the Prolocutor (Chairman), men like Thomas Goodwin whose works will surely endure as long as there is a Christian Church, and others like the brilliant Catechist Herbert Palmer.

Their work, then, is not—nor was it intended to be—a heady academic theological treatise. It is a guidebook to the doctrines of the Christian faith written for ordinary Christians. Like Paul its authors believed that it is through the renewing of the mind that the transformation of our lives takes place. Read it from this perspective and you will soon discover that the *Confession* is a thesaurus of deep pastoral wisdom. Its chapters on Providence, Sanctification, Adoption, Assurance, for example, mark it out as a valuable manual for all kinds of pastoral situations.

This edition of the *Confession of Faith* is what our forefathers would have called a '*Vade Mecum*'—literally a 'Go with me'—a book small enough to take anywhere, but substantial enough to be useful everywhere. Study its contents well and frequently, memorize some of its statements, reflect on the

multitude of ways its teaching transforms your thinking and your living, and you will surely agree. Use it frequently and it may well be that, of all documents of its size outside of the apostolic writings, the *Confession of Faith* may become the book you treasure most. The truth the *Confession* expresses has the power to shape your thinking; its teaching will both stretch and clarify your understanding. In addition—and best of all—the pastoral wisdom of the *Confession of Faith* will help you to live the Christian life with the perspective magnificently expressed in the answer to the first question of the *Shorter Catechism* that accompanied it— glorifying God and enjoying him for ever.

The *Confession of Faith* has, from time to time, undergone various revisions. It would be impractical and make for an unattractive publication to attempt to include all of these revisions. But while this edition reproduces the text of 1647 its practical usefulness has been enhanced by providing the three major ‘American Revisions’ of 1788 (see Chapters 20, 23, and 31). All of these deal with the relationship between church and state. Additionally, footnotes

have been inserted at Chapters 22.III, 24.IV, and 25.VI, to indicate the other places where the Confession has been altered, albeit in more minor matters. In this way members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) will find here the text of the Confession adopted by their own denominations.

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON
Columbia
South Carolina
USA
July 2012

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THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Chapter 1 *Of the Holy Scripture.*

ALTHOUGH the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable;¹ yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation.² Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church;³ and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing:⁴ which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary;⁵ those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.⁶

¹¹ *1 John* 2:20,27; *John* 16:13,14; *1 Cor.* 2:10,11,12; *Isa.* 59:21.

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.¹² Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word:¹³ and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.¹⁴

¹² *2 Tim.* 3:15,16,17; *Gal.* 1:8,9; *2 Thess.* 2:2.

¹³ *John* 6:45; *1 Cor.* 2:9-12. ¹⁴ *1 Cor.* 11:13,14; *1 Cor.* 14:26,40.

VII. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all:¹⁵ yet those things

which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.¹⁶

¹⁵ 2 *Pet.* 3:16. ¹⁶ *Psa.* 119:105,130.

VIII. The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical;¹⁷ so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.¹⁸ But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them,¹⁹ therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they

come,²⁰ that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner;²¹ and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.²²

¹⁷ *Matt.* 5:18. ¹⁸ *Isa.* 8:20; *Acts* 15:15; *John* 5:39,46. ¹⁹ *John* 5:39.

²⁰ *I Cor.* 14:6,9,11,12,24,27,28. ²¹ *Col.* 3:16. ²² *Rom.* 15:4.

IX. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.²³

²³ *2 Pet.* 1:20,21; *Acts* 15:15,16.

X. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.²⁴

²⁴ *Matt.* 22:29,31; *Eph.* 2:20 with *Acts* 28:25.