

# —A Study of the Westminster Confession of Faith—

## *An Introduction*

### I. THE HISTORY OF ITS OCCASION

- A. From the beginning there was a strong and essential difference between the Reformation in England and in Scotland, arising in great measure from the catalyst which effected it.
1. In England Henry VIII's desire for a divorce from Catherine to marry Anne Boleyn was, providentially, the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. When the Pope refused him a divorce, he went over the pope's head, married Anne secretly; and in 1534, with the support of Parliament, by the Act of Supremacy, Henry declared himself the supreme head of the Church of England. This effectively separated the church from Rome.
    - a) The Reformation was therefore begun, conducted, and stopped almost entirely according to the pleasure of the reigning sovereign. The will of the monarch, then, was an essential element from the start, and continued to be so throughout the course of the Reformation.
    - b) This meant the Church of England was based on and pervaded by the influence of the Erastian principle—the sovereign being recognized as the supreme judge and authority in both civil and church matters.
    - c) *However*, the great changes in the will of the monarchs from Henry VIII to the Stuart rule in the early 17th C. added momentum to the desire for further reformation of the church according to Scripture and akin to the Reformed Churches in other lands.
      - (1) Hopes for a complete reformation were created in the brief reign of young Edward VI who was sympathetic to the Protestant faith
      - (2) The persecutions of Protestants under Bloody Mary galvanized the desire for further reformation
      - (3) Elizabeth's mild reign provided the impetus for those who wanted a more radical reform and the church reformed both spiritually and organizationally. These became known as the Puritans, those committed to the Church of England, but desiring to see it purified according to Scripture.
      - (4) When Elizabeth died and the crown of England fell to the King of Scotland, James I, he united the crowns. But the parliaments were not at all united.
        - (a) James was educated in Calvinism and the Puritans had hopes for further reformation of the church.
        - (b) But James increased his personal commitment to the divine right of kings and saw the democratizing progress in Puritanism and resisted it. Therefore he opposed evangelical religion and stifled reformation.
    - d) Charles I came to the throne of the united kingdoms in 1625 and, with the encouragement of Bishop William Laud, pushed his father's policies even further in an effort to stifle protestantism and promote Prelacy—the government of the Church by bishops of high social rank and power.
      - (1) In 1629 Charles dismissed Parliament (with whom he had many disagreements) and ruled in what many called The Eleven Year Tyranny, not only over England, but pushing hard into presbyterian Scotland with his regal absolutism.
      - (2) Having already suffered much from the absolutism imposed by the Stuart kings into their church matters, when Charles attempted to impose a liturgy and prayer book upon the spiritually independent Church of Scotland in 1637, a riot was prompted in Edinburgh which escalated into general unrest and a universal resolve to return to presbyterianism.

- (3) In resistance to Charles' invasion of their religious liberties, Scotland signed the National Covenant in 1638, essentially making themselves a theocracy, submissive to no other Head or King in both civil and church matters but God, through His Word.
- (4) Needing money for war against the Scots, Charles was forced to recall Parliament in 1640. But unwilling to be dismissed at the King's whim again, Parliament made the King agree that it could not be dismissed without its own consent.
- (5) But as the struggle with the King and his bishops continued to threaten the Church with tyranny and ceremonies all-too-reminiscent of the Catholic church, it soon became necessary to break the absolutism of the King in church matters. This led to the break out of civil war, dividing England between Charles in the north and Parliament in the south.
  - (a) The legal tyrannies of Charles and the prelatical oppressions of Laud forced a crisis in the country. Submission became a sin and resistance became a duty as both civil and religious liberties were threatened.
- (6) And as the cause of the King had more support from the prelates and bishops, so the cause of Puritanism, that is of a pure Protestantism, became ever more identical with that of the Parliament; so that it became a struggle between King and prelate on the one side and Parliament and Puritan on the other.
- (7) Thus what began as a controversy between the King and the Pope shifted to a contest between the King and Parliament. The doctrine of the Church of England (The Thirty-nine Articles established in 1563) was thoroughly Reformed and anti-Catholic as well as anti-Arminian, but the King's absolutism and affinity for prelacy continued to threaten the government and worship of the church and this compelled Parliament to act independent of the King, in the interests of both civil and ecclesiastical liberty.
- (8) \*\*It's important to note that neither side intended a Church free of the domination of the State, they only differed as to the civil authority to which the Church should be subject, whether the King or Parliament.
  - (a) It was within the context of this conflict with Parliament and civil war in England that the Scottish Army and the position of the Scottish church as a Presbyterian church began to take on very significant proportions. Practically speaking, the Scottish army and Church became bargaining tools: whoever could win the Scots would win the day.
- (9) In 1641 Parliament rendered itself independent of the King, its sittings permanent, and committed itself by subscription to a bond to "reduce within bounds that exorbitant power which the prelates had assumed to themselves"—who were now aligned with the King under the leadership of Bishop William Laud—"and to persevere in the defense of liberty and of the Protestant religion to set up a juster discipline and government in the church."
- (10) This was to be effected by the calling of a general synod of "the most grave, pious, learned, and judicious divines [ministers] of the United Kingdoms" who would *advise* Parliament and with whom Parliament would consult in matters concerning the church's worship and liturgy.
  - (a) The assembly was to *advise* Parliament in the establishment (in the place of the existing prelatical government of the Church) of a Church government "agreeable to God's Word, most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the Church, and in nearer agreement with the Church of Scotland and other Reformed Churches abroad." Only secondarily was the assembly to concern itself with vindicating and clearing the doctrine of the Church of England (The Thirty-nine Articles) from false interpretations.

- i) Note: there was no need for a new Confession of Faith since The Thirty-nine Articles were thoroughly Reformed.
    - (b) It never entered the mind of Parliament to set up in the Church any manner of government over which it did not itself retain control. It was determined to hold both civil and ecclesiastical power in its own hands.
  - (11) The calling of this assembly was prepared as a bill and passed through both the House of Lord and House of Commons, but the King refused to support it and therefore it failed. This would happen four more times. Finally, when a sixth bill to this effect was passed by both Houses on June 12, 1643, the bill was put into effect by Parliament *without* the King's assent and the assembly was convened on July 1, 1643.
  - (12) In order to prosecute its design, Parliament abolished all marks of prelacy (the offices of archbishop, bishop, and the whole framework of prelate government). This outraged Charles, which in turn made it *imperative* for Parliament to obtain the assistance of the Scots.
  - (13) *However*, the assistance of the Scots could only be had at the price of a distinctively ecclesiastical alliance.
2. Scotland was never entirely at peace with the extensions of monarchial power coming up from England. To boot, the monarchs were more bold in Scotland in the imposition of their rule and governance over both church and state matters. Furthermore, ever since the Reformation and the powerful preaching of such men as Patrick Hamilton, John Knox, and Andrew Melville, Scotland had long cherished the ideal of a free Church in a free State and the government of the Church was in representative presbyterian courts which asserted and exercised their own independent spiritual jurisdiction.
- a) They recognized the King as their civil magistrate, of course, but the interference of the King with the working of the church was widely resented as mere tyranny.
  - b) Moreover, the King's interference ever had the mark of trying to destroy the Scottish church government and assimilate the church of Scotland in worship and government to the model of the Church of England, which the Scots considered to be less pure and Scriptural than their own. The King's interference was therefore regarded as religious persecution.
  - c) Also, the fact that this persecuting tyranny was mainly at the hands of a foreign bishop (William Laud) who had the King's ear, and whose efforts were being despised even in England itself, put Scotland in need of only a spark to be set on fire.
  - d) That spark came on July 23, 1637 when the minister of St. Giles in Edinburgh began to read from the Book of Common Prayer which King Charles had drawn up for imposition in Scotland in an effort to squash its spiritual independence. Jenny Geddes is said to have thrown her stool at the minister, which was followed by many others throwing Bibles, stools, sticks, and stones, shouting that a Pope and Antichrist had entered the church and that he ought to be stoned. The minister fled for his life and the dissenters were put outside. The Dean attempted to resume the service but could hardly get on for the uproar at the door. Scotland had had enough.
  - e) "All that they had been doing these thirty years past was thrown down at once. The Scots immediately reclaimed their ecclesiastical, and, in doing that, also their civil liberties; eradicated at once every trace of the prelacy which had been imposed upon them, and restored their Presbyterian government; secured the simplicity of their worship and reinstated the strictness of their discipline; and withal [in 1638] bound themselves by a great oath—the National Covenant—to the perpetual preservation of their religious settlement in its purity. The entire nation was bound to God and to each other in a solemn bond of the maintenance and defense of sacred truth and freedom."
  - f) In 1639 a General Assembly was held in Glasgow, in which the system of Prelacy was abolished and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland was restored. The next task was to write

- up a Confession of Faith, a Form of Government, a Book of Discipline, and a Directory for Worship; but in God's providence the Scottish Presbyterians would end up doing this on English soil.
- g) *Thus* the Scotland to whom the English Parliament made its appeal for aid in the summer of 1643 was a “covenanted nation.” They knew that if the King should succeed to overpower Parliament he would immediately assail Scotland; but, given their National Covenant, they could not enter into an alliance with Parliament on anything less than a hallowed and sacred cause. Parliament must enter with them into a religious covenant, binding itself to the establishment of a Presbyterian Church in England; and after all, was this not Parliament's professed intention in calling the Assembly?
  - h) Scotland therefore refused aid without a spiritual covenant between them, committing England to a spiritual reformation of its own Church. England's desperation prevented them from disagreeing with these terms and on Sept 25, 1643 the alliance between the Scottish Covenanters and the English Parliament was signed.
    - (1) From the English point of view, this Covenant functioned as a bargaining tool to bring the Scots to the support of the parliamentary cause; but from the Scottish point of view it was an unparalleled opportunity to bring their influence to bear on the reformation of the Church of England.
  - i) This pact bound the two nations to themselves and to each other in a “solemn league and covenant” in which they were committed on the one hand, to the *preservation* of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, and on the other, to the *reformation* of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, according to the Word of God and the example of the best reformed churches; to the end that thereby “the Churches of God in the three kingdoms might be brought to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion [by] confession of faith, form of Church government, directory for worship, and catechizing.”
  - j) By this sacred engagement with Scotland, the Assembly's task took a radical change—now what was needed, along with the other church documents required of them, was not a mere revision of the Anglican articles, but a new Confession of Faith altogether. Also, the new arrangement necessitated the presence of Scottish representatives.
  - k) Whatever else Parliament might want of this Assembly, it would now call upon it to propose a new Form of Church Government, a new Directory for Worship, a new Confession of Faith, and a new Catechetical Manual. And in the framing of these four documents, the Assembly's aim would now necessarily be to prepare them acceptably, not only to the Church of England, for its further *reformation*, but also to the Church of Scotland, for the *preservation* of the doctrines, worship, discipline, and government already established in that Church.
  - l) Thus the signed covenant not only pledged the two nations to uniformity in religion, but to a uniformity on the model of the religion already established in the Church of Scotland. The result of this covenant was that the Commissioners who went to London from Scotland under its provisions, went up not as delegates from the Scottish Church to lend their hand to the work of the Assembly, but as the accredited representatives of the Scottish people, to treat with the English Parliament in the settlement of the details of that religious uniformity which the two nations had agreed with one another to institute.
  - m) By refusing to become members of the Assembly and remaining Treaty Commissioners, the Scotch ministers ensured that they would function as an informal committee with veto powers.

## II. THE NATURE OF THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY AND ITS CONFESSION

### A. The nature of the assembly

1. When the Assembly was called together, there was no organized Church in England. Prelacy had been abolished and no other form of church government existed.
  - a) Thus the Assembly did not meet as a church court, but was in reality a para-church assembly of divines (ministers) called together in a case of extreme emergency to consult, deliberate, and advise, but not to exercise directly any judicial or ecclesiastical functions (cf. WCF 23).
  - b) The Assembly therefore had no conformity with either the Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Congregational systems of church government; it neither ruled Parliament nor was ruled by Parliament; it deliberated, reasoned, voted, formed its own free judgment concerning the important matters before it, and gave the results as its advice to Parliament.
2. The ministers called to the Assembly were specifically chosen by Parliament and were a powerhouse of wisdom, knowledge, and grace. Their reputation in learning, conviction, grace, and piety had preceded them. They were the best and most Reformed men in the land.
3. Moreover, these divines stood on the other side of the countless heresies which had threatened the Church of Christ and were recipients of the numerous Creeds and Confession of the Church which had effectively silenced those heresies; they were heirs to the Reformation that took hold in Europe and stood in the midst of England's struggling Reformation, very desirous of a complete reformation, the likes of what had happened in Scotland, and were therefore in the best position to address the present needs of the Church. Theirs was a herculean task and they came to it with grace and resolve.

#### B. The minutiae of the assembly

1. The greater part of the divines were Puritans inclined to Presbyterianism; but nearly all of these had been originally Episcopalians, as far as their ordination is concerned, and would have been agreeable to a modified Episcopal church government.
2. As regards their views on church government:
  - a) Many *Episcopalians* were originally invited by Parliament though few actually came. Indeed, the Episcopalians withdrew subsequent to the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant with Scotland because no honest prelatist could agree with its terms.
    - (1) Moreover, after the signing of the Covenant and the withdrawing of the Episcopalians, the subject of Prelacy had no place among the Assembly's discussions.
    - (2) It seems a few of the men advocated a *mixed Presbyterian and Episcopal* government (Twisse, Gataker, Gouge, Palmer, Temple).
  - b) There were only two of the divines that entertained *Erastian* principles—Lightfoot and Coleman though several of the lay assessors were very supportive. Erastians held that Christian pastors were simply teachers and not rulers in the Church, and that all church and civil power rests in the hands of the civil magistrate. Though small in number, because these brothers were of such great learning and ability and had the support of Parliament, they gave the assembly no little annoyance at times.
    - (1) “The subject of Erastianism came under discussion in the Assembly again and again. The sum of the matter is this, that the Assembly, succeeded in carrying, with but one dissentient vote (that of Lightfoot; Coleman was absent from indisposition), that simple but truly noble proposition which, as has been well said, “cuts the heart out of the erastian theory,” a proposition which, while it maintains its place in the standards of the Presbyterian church, and retains its hold on the judgment and hearts of her ministers and her people, must ultimately prove a sufficient bulwark against submission to the encroachments of the civil power: “The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.” —Symington
  - c) The *Independents* were at first only 5 in number (Goodwin, Nye, Burroughs, Bridge, and Simpson) but afterwards increased to about a dozen. These were called “The Five Dissenting

- Brethren.” These brothers were not only men of eminent learning and talent, but men of great piety and credit who had the boldness and stiffness to fight for what they believed was a good cause. When they lost the debate on the floor, they had no qualms of making recourse to private political intrigue, in order either to secure time or to occasion a diversion in their favor. They therefore possessed considerable influence in hindering and finally preventing the Assembly in its work of national ecclesiastical construction.
- (1) It’s worth noting that all of the Congregationalists were paedo-baptists.
- d) The party which possessed an overwhelming majority consisted of *Presbyterians* and the great majority of them belonged to the English Puritans. They had seen so much of the evils of Prelatic domination on the one hand and sectarian anarchy on the other, as to have been gradually led to form a favorable opinion of Presbyterianism, which occupied the golden mean between these two extremes.
- (1) When the points of church government were finally settled, the drawing up and passing of the Confession of Faith were comparatively easy matters, inasmuch as the members of the Assembly were pretty much agreed on doctrinal points.
- e) Thus the whole number of the Assembly amounted to 121 ministers and 32 lay assessors (members of Parliament); but the average attendance in their meetings was around 70.
- f) “Such were the parties which existed in the Westminster Assembly, parties whose jarring sentiments, while occasioning long and sometimes bitter and unseemly contentions, nevertheless under Providence tended materially to the elucidation and final triumph of truth, and to the confirming of men's minds in the scriptural soundness of conclusions which had been arrived at by such a deliberate and sifting process.” –Symington
3. The Scottish commissioners appointed to consult and deliberate, but not to vote, were six in number—four ministers, Henderson (the author of the Solemn League and Covenant), Baillie, Rutherford, and Gillespie, and two elders—Lord Maitland and Johnstone of Warriston.
- a) “We cannot afford time to portray the characters of the Scots commissioners individually and minutely. The extensive knowledge, the studious habits, and the promptitude and ease in graphic composition, of Baillie; the mental power, the logical precision, the affectionate earnestness, and the lofty devotional feeling, of Rutherford; the calm dignity, the intellectual might, the prodigious wisdom, and the true moral greatness, of Henderson; and the untiring energy, the comprehensive learning, the controversial tact, and the brilliant eloquence, of young Gillespie, conspired to render the commissioners from Scotland the admiration of the Assembly, and to reflect the highest honor on the country and the church to which they belonged.” –Symington
- b) Note: the Scotch Commissioners rightly had the privilege of the floor at the Assembly since the results of the Assembly’s work must at all costs be acceptable to them; but their work was really outside of the Assembly with Parliament. They were Treaty Commissioners empowered to treat with Parliament itself and were peremptory in the establishment of a thoroughly Presbyterian church. Thus they were not appointed as members of the Assembly. They made up, with Parliament and a committee from the divines, the “Grand Committee,” to which the Assembly’s work on the four points of uniformity were directed.
- (1) “When our commissioners came up, they were desired to sit as members of the Assembly; but they wisely declined to do so; but since they came up as commissioners for our national Church to treat for uniformity, they required to be dealt with in that capacity. They were willing, as private men, to sit in the Assembly, and upon occasion to give advice in points debated; but for the uniformity they required a committee might be appointed from the Parliament and Assembly to treat with them concerning that matter.” –Baillie
- c) Note: in the Lord’s providence, the Scotch Commissioners were mightily used as a moderating agent which kept the English Presbyterians from precipitate and aggressive

- action against the constant tug of the Episcopalians on the one hand, the Independents on the other, and the Erastians on yet another. Notwithstanding, the Commissioners did not always get their way. E.g., in the end, the For for Church Government had to be reduced to its lowest terms and therefore shorn of much of its strength and attractiveness, in the face of the protests of the Independents, and the determinedly Erastian Parliament.
4. The Assembly was convened on July 1, 1643. But it was not until July 8 that work was begun, after each member had made a solemn protestation “to maintain nothing in point of doctrine but what ‘he believed’ to be most agreeable to the Word of God, nor in point of discipline, but what may make most for God’s glory and the peace and good of His church.” The Assembly continued to hold regular meetings until Feb 22, 1649 and then continued as a formal committee for the examination of ministers until Mar 25, 1652.
    - a) The first task committed to the Assembly was the revision of the Thirty-nine Articles and by Oct 12 it had completed its revision of the first fifteen Articles. They were on track to complete their task in less than a year. But the signing of the Covenant with Scotland gave their task such a dramatic turn that the Articles were essentially thrown aside.
    - b) The number of session held was 1163 and the period of its duration was 5 years, 6 months, and 21 days. Once the work on the four points of uniformity was completed, the Scottish Commissioners returned home.
      - (1) “Believe it, for as slow as you may think us, and as we pronounce ourselves to be, yet all the days of the week we are pretty busy. We sit daily from nine till near one; and afternoon till night we are usually in committees. Saturday, our only free day, is to prepare for Sunday, wherein we seldom [refrain] from preaching in some eminent place of the city. Judge what time we have for letters, and writing of pamphlets, and many other business. We would think it a great ease, both in our body and spirits, to be at home.... If our neighbors at Edinburgh tasted the sauce wherein we dip our venison at London, their teeth would not water so fast to be here as some of them doth.” –Baillie
  5. They began their work with preparing a Directory of Government, Worship, and Discipline. This work was much delayed by constant controversies with the Independent and Erastian factions, and was not finished until late 1644.
    - a) They commenced their work on a Confession of Faith by appointing a committee to propose the main propositions to be addressed. Though starting the Confession and Catechisms simultaneously, they eventually decided to complete the Confession first and then construct the Catechisms on its model. The Confession was presented complete to Parliament on Dec 3, 1646, but Parliament recommitted it to the Assembly for the inclusion of Scripture proofs. They resubmitted it with the proofs on Apr 29, 1647.
    - b) The Shorter Catechism was finished and submitted on Nov 5, 1647 and the Larger on Apr 14, 1648.
  6. Parliament established the Presbyterian Church in England *experimentally* until the end of the next session of Parliament (a year later). But before that date, Parliament had become subservient to the power of the army under Cromwell. Presbyteries and Synods were soon superseded by his Committee of Triers, while the Presbyterian ministers were ejected in mass (2000 of them) by Charles II in 1662.
    - a) Thus what the Assembly produced 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 all over the world for all time.

### C. The nature of its doctrinal statements

1. Because it was intended to replace the Thirty-nine Articles, and because the Assembly had no ecclesiastical authority of its own, the Confession was written in the voice of a third person and not the voice of the first person (as, e.g. The Heidelberg Catechism). The men labored to present

Biblical doctrine rather than personal theology to Parliament. They proceeded upon the principle that though no man's conscience can be compelled to believe, it can only be enlightened with the truth of God's Word.

2. Given the make-up of the Assembly the Confession is necessarily an inclusive, ecumenical, and yet thoroughly Christian and Reformed statement of faith, shutting out heresies of the past, guarding against heresies in the future, and securing orthodoxy for the foreseeable future. It gives expression to what we might call "Catholic Calvinism". "Catholic" in the sense that it stands on the shoulders of the great Creeds of the Christian Church; and "Calvinistic" 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*.
3. "A large share of the honor due to the Westminster Assembly for its incomparable productions must be ascribed to the efficient aid lent by the commissioners from Scotland. This is especially the case in respect of every thing connected with the Presbyterian form of church government, which, notwithstanding the formidable opposition they had to encounter, both from Erastians and Independents within, and from the Houses of Parliament without, they succeeded in settling on a solid basis of Scripture. "Had not God sent Mr. Henderson, Mr. Rutherford, and Mr. Gillespie among them," says Baillie, "I see not that ever they could have agreed to any settled government." –Symington
4. "While all the commissioners contributed their share of labor, in committees, in giving advice, in writing letters, and in publishing pamphlets on subjects of importance, the chief weight of the public discussions devolved on Rutherford and Gillespie. "None in all the company," says Baillie, "did reason more, or more pertinently, than Mr. Gillespie. That is an excellent youth; my heart blesses God in his behalf. Of a truth there is no man whose parts in a public dispute I do so admire. He has studied so accurately all the points ever yet came to our Assembly; he has gotten so ready, so assured, so solid a way of public debating, that however there be in the Assembly diverse very excellent men, yet in my poor judgment, there is not one who speaks more rationally and to the point, than that brave youth has ever done." –Symington

### III. THE NECESSITY FOR CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

- A. There have been many objections urged against the use of Creeds and Confessions of Faith.
  1. The strongest objection is that which accuses Confessions of usurping a position and authority due to divine truth alone. But this objection arises from an erroneous view of what a Confession of Faith really is of why a Confession of Faith is necessary for the Church.
  2. The necessity for the formation of Confessions of Faith does not lie in the nature of the sacred truth revealed to man, but in the nature of man himself. A Confession of Faith is neither a revelation of divine truth nor even a rule of faith and practice, but it is a help in both. It is a declaration of the manner in which any Christian or any Church understands the truth which has been revealed.
  3. Its object is not to teach divine truth (only the Bible can do that), but to exhibit a clear, systematic, and intelligible declaration of our own sentiments, and to furnish the means of ascertaining the opinions of others, especially in religious controversies.
- B. Consider an example
  1. The human mind is so prone to error and of such a widely diversified capacity, that when even *a simple proposition of truth* is presented for reception, that truth may be reproduced in almost as many different aspects as there are different minds considering it.
  2. When a man declares how he understands the truth, this is his 'confession of faith' respecting that truth; and when all of the men in a group had thus stated their confession, if any harmony was found among their understandings, it would become the 'confession of faith' of them all.



3. But it would be more than that—it would be both a bond of union between them on that point of truth and also a joint testimony to all other men; not as absolutely teaching that truth, but as absolutely conveying the sense in which these men understood it; *and*, it might even serve as the term for admission to the body which these men compose.
4. In such a scenario, all will agree that there is no infringement of the natural liberty of any man, nor any attempt to control or overbear his conscientious convictions respecting what he believes to be truth. If any man cannot agree with the joint testimony borne by these men, this may be a cause of mutual regret, but it could neither confer on the group any right to compel him to join contrary to his convictions, nor entitle him to complain of being excluded from a body of men with whose opinions he disagrees.

C. Now let this be applied to the subject of religious truth.

1. Religious truth is the revelation of God's will to man, which comes to us a written record.
2. The Bible is therefore the only and the all-sufficient rule of faith for every soul with regard to what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.
3. But, the question immediately arises whether all to whom this revelation has been made understands it in the same sense? If any man say that his only rule of faith is the Bible, every man who believes the Bible to be the Word of God will agree, but still the question returns, 'What do you understand the Bible to teach?' If any man then repeated a series of verses, still the question would return, 'in what sense does he understand these verses?'
4. \*\*The question is *not*, therefore, one which respects God's truth, but one which respects man's truth. It's not a question of what the Bible teaches, but of how man understands that teaching.

D. Another element now comes into view.

1. The Bible not only contains a revelation of eternal truth, which it is man's duty to receive and to hold, but it also appoints a body of men to be the depositories and teachers of that truth—a Church, which is not a voluntary association of men, but a divine institution, subject directly to God, and having no authority over conscience. And in instituting the Church, God has promised to bestow upon it His Spirit, to lead it into the knowledge of the truth—a promise made not only to the Church, but to every individual member of it.
2. Thus the Christian Church, as a divine institution, takes the Word of God alone, and the whole Word of God, as her only infallible rule of faith and practice; but she must also frame and promulgate a statement of what she understands the Word of God to teach.
3. She does this, not assuming any authority to suppress, change, or amend anything that God's Word teaches, but in discharge of the various duties which she owes to God, to the world, and to those of her own communion.
4. *Thus*, a Confession of Faith is not the very voice of divine truth, but the echo of that voice from souls that have heard its utterance, felt its power, and are answering to its call.
5. With her Confession, the Church leaves the world in no doubt of the manner in which she understands the message entrusted to her to deliver to it.
6. And with her Confession the Church promotes and confirms the knowledge of its members, guards them against the hazard of being led into errors, and does what it can to secure that those raised up teach its future generations will continue to teach the same divine and saving truths.
  - a) It should be greatly appreciated by anyone who seeks admission into any Church that in its Confession of Faith he can obtain a full exhibition of the terms of communion to which he is required to consent.
7. It's clear, then, that a Church cannot adequately discharge its duty to God, to the world, and to its own members, without a Confession of Faith.

- E. There has never been a period in which the Christian Church has been without a Confession. What began as “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” was slowly expanded to address the perverse notions of false teachers threatening the Church and to assert the Church’s understanding of threatened doctrines.
1. The existence of a Confession of Faith is therefore ever a standing defense against the danger of any Church lapsing unawares into heresy. For although no Church ought to regard its Confession as a standard of faith, in any other than a subordinate sense, still it is a standard of admitted faith, which the Church may not lightly abandon, and a term of communion to its own members, until its articles are accused of being erroneous, and again brought to the final and supreme standard, the Word of God and the teaching of the Holy Spirit, sincerely, humbly, and earnestly sought in faith and prayer.
- F. The Strengths of the Westminster Confession of Faith
1. The remarkable comprehensiveness and accuracy of its character as a systematic exhibition of divine truth, a systematic theology.
    - a) It begins with the statement of first principles and proceeds to the regular development and final consummation of the whole scheme of revealed truth. Nothing essential is omitted and nothing is extended out of proportion to its importance. A careful and close reading of this Confession would not only protect the mind against error but guard it against giving undue importance to some favorite doctrine.
    - b) It is arguably the wisest of creeds in its teaching and the finest in its doctrinal expression. It is a reliable guide to the Scriptures, which are the only guide to God. A patient study of the 2500 proof-texts provided by the Assembly as the basis for its doctrine would yield rich dividends.
  2. Being framed by men of distinguished learning and ability, who were thoroughly conversant with the history of the Church from the earliest times until the period in which they lived, it contains the settled judgment of these profound divines on all previous heresies and subjects of controversy which had in any age or country agitated the Church.
    - a) Without expressly naming even one heresy or entering into controversy, each error is condemned, not by a direct statement and refutation of it, but by a clear, definite, and strong statement of the converse truth. Everything of an irritating nature is suppressed and the pure and simple truth alone is displayed.
  3. An astonishing precision of thought and language. The whole mental training of the eminent divines of that period led to this result. They were accustomed to cast every argument into the syllogistic form and to adjust all its terms with the utmost care and accuracy. Long debates were sometimes spent on a single word as they labored for accuracy and agreement with the whole counsel of God.
  4. The coherence and clarity of its carefully focused chapters. The members of the Assembly were eager to harvest the best biblical exegesis of the Reformers, the most useful doctrinal structures of the medieval theologians, and the most enduring insights of the church fathers.

Bibliography:

An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Robert Shaw  
 The Westminster Assembly and its Work, B. B. Warfield  
 The Confession of Faith, A. A. Hodge  
 Confessing the Faith, Chad Van Dixhoorn  
 Westminster Standards class at WTS, Sinclair Ferguson  
 Historical Sketch of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, William Symington

Assignments:

\*Read Chapters I and II of the Introduction in Hodge—the questions at the end of the chapter should be used as a review, to make sure you understand the contents of the chapter.

—The next class will meet at 8AM on 11 October