

Studies in the Westminster Confession of faith

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The Westminster Confession of Faith [hereafter called WCF] is classed as one of the subordinate standards of our denomination.

The primary standard by which we judge all things has to be the Word of God. We stand for the old principle rediscovered at the time of the Protestant Reformation: Sola Scripture - the Scriptures alone. Believing the Bible to be the verbally inspired and infallible Word of God, we hold it to be the final authority for all our belief and practice. To use the language of the Shorter Catechism answer to Qu 2: *The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.* Therefore the Word of God must be classed as our primary standard.

The WCF along with the Articles of Faith of the FPC are classed as our subordinate standards. We adhere to the exposition of Scripture doctrine that is set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Articles of Faith of the Free Presbyterian Church. The WCF & Articles of Faith derive their authority from the Scriptures.

It has always been important to define what is meant by Scriptural and theological terms. They can be made to mean different things to different people. If you ever visit the grave of Josiah Welsh [John Knox's grandson] in Templepatrick, you will notice that beside him is buried a Non-subscribing Presbyterian minister. The citation on the tombstone speaks of this man's allegiance to the Holy Scriptures and liberty of conscience, etc, etc. You would be forgiven for thinking that he was a faithful minister. He wasn't. He was an Arian - a denier of the doctrine of the Trinity. The name Non-Subscribing comes from their refusal to sign the WCF as a confession of Scriptural teaching and as a confession of their own faith. Scripture and Church history teaches the importance of having confessional standards.

The WCF is a systematic setting forth of Scriptural teaching on important issues. Some of these issues are more important than others. There are issues that are 'fundamentals of the faith' and cannot be denied by anyone who would attain eternal life. There are other issues important in their own right but not in the same class as what would be called the 'fundamentals of the faith'.

It is important to distinguish between the two. As a Church we differ from the WCF on baptism. As you well know, a person can hold to a 'Baptist' position within our denomination on the issue of the mode and subjects of baptism. To go a little further out, there are believers outside our denomination who are not of a Reformed persuasion. They are Arminian in doctrine. That doesn't mean they are not saved. What it does mean is that there are different degrees of importance attached to different doctrines. There are matters that we can agree to differ on within our denomination; there are matters which we can agree to differ on without our denomination with other believers; there are, however, other issues that are so fundamental that if you deny them you cannot be saved. The issue of Arianism being a clear example. We must ever be careful to keep that perspective.

As an introduction to these monthly studies on the WCF I want firstly to consider the background to the drawing up of the WCF. The WCF was drawn up between 1643-49. Those involved in it met during a most turbulent time in English history. These were the days of Charles I, Oliver Cromwell and the English Civil War. The Civil war began in 1642 and saw Charles I beheaded in 1649.

We need to go back a little further in history to discover why it was set up in the first place. The Westminster Assembly of Divines was initially appointed by what became known as 'the Long Parliament', which first met 1640. Its initial purpose, under Puritan pressure, was to restructure the Church of England.

The Puritans within 'the Long Parliament' had made five attempts to appoint an Assembly between June 1642 and May 1643, but each time King Charles I refused to sign the bill. A sixth bill was prepared and passed as an ordinance of the House of Commons; and with the agreement of the House of Lords, it became effective without the king's assent in June 1643.

The initial Assembly consisted of 30 laymen [10 lords and 20 commoners] and 121 divines. There were theologians who attended from New England, such as John Cotton of Boston and Thomas Hooker of Connecticut.

The ministers were selected to represent four separate groups:

- [1] The Episcopalians [rule by bishops] included such figures as James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh. The episcopalian group usually did not attend the sessions, because the king had not authorised them.
- [2] The Presbyterians [of whom were many Puritans] were the largest group, and included figures such as Obadiah Sedgwick.
- [3] A small group of Independents [of the various Congregationalist views] were present and had the support of Oliver Cromwell, and these included Thomas Goodwin, Joseph Caryl and William Bridge.
- [4] The Erastian representatives, such as John Lightfoot, who favored the view that the church was subject to the civil authority.

With the abdication of the Episcopalians and the deaths of a few others, Parliament determined that an additional 21 ministers should be appointed, these were to be known as superadded divines.

The average daily attendance was between sixty and eighty members. The Assembly's first meeting was in the Henry VII Lady Chapel of Westminster Abbey on 1st July 1643. It later moved during the winter to the Jerusalem Chamber.

The first ten weeks of the Assembly's existence was expended in debating the first fifteen of the 39 Articles of the Church of England.

After the initial setting up of the Assembly it was enlarged and its scope widened. Parliament and the king had first met in battle in 1642. The civil war between the forces of Parliament and the Royalists supporting Charles I was by now at a stalemate. The Irish Catholics who had revolted in 1641 were threatening to join the Royalist side.

John Pym, Parliamentary leader and a Puritan, decided that an ally for Parliament must be found. Overtures were made to Scotland. The English initially only sought to enter into a civil league for the defence of civil liberties. The Scots responded that the spirit of the contest in which they had been engaged [i.e. the Bishop's Wars] was of a religious character, in defence of religious liberty. They wanted a much wider agreement between England and Scotland. Eventually the two sides formulated a document intended to serve both causes, and known as The Solemn League and Covenant.

In return for sending the Scots army south to support the Parliamentary forces, the Scots obliged the English to *'undertake 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'*. In addition it was agreed that 'popery and prelacy should be extirpated'

The English Parliament eventually accepted these terms and agreed to convene an Assembly of English and Scottish ministers who would combine to bring about the agreed changes.

On October 12, 1643, the Westminster Assembly received a directive from Parliament that the divines should forthwith: *'confer and treat among themselves of such a discipline and government as may be most agreeable to God's holy 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'*.

A number of Scottish commissioners, ministers and elders, were authorised to travel to London to sit with the Westminster Assembly. Among those appointed were: Robert Baillie, Robert Douglas [who never actually attended], George Gillespie, Alexander Henderson, and Samuel Rutherford. The Scottish Commissioners attended as a consultative committee, rather than as members of the Assembly, but their influence was nonetheless considerable.

The Assembly therefore abandoned work on the 39 Articles of Religion and proceeded to create an entirely new set of documents. Over the next four years, the Assembly produced and forwarded to Parliament: [1] The Directory for the Publick Worship of God; [2] The Form of Presbyterial Church Government; [3] A credal statement, thereafter known as 'The Westminster Confession of Faith'; [4] A "Larger Catechism" and a 'Shorter Catechism'. The House of Commons also insisted that the Assembly include Scriptural proof texts with the Confession and the two catechisms.

This august assembly met 1,163 times between 1643 and 1649, and was never formally dissolved by Parliament.