

TRUTH AT ALL COSTS: WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

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Matthew 22:15-22

The Presbyterian Church (USA)—our denomination—has a constitution. That should not be a surprise to anyone since we strive to do things, as the Apostle Paul put it, “decently and in order.”¹ Our constitution consists of two parts—the Book of Order and the Book of Confessions. The Book of Order contains the nuts and bolts of running the Presbyterian Church. It offers a theological basis for our existence; it has a section on how we are to worship God; it tells us how to govern, how to form a new church, how to dissolve a church, how to call a pastor, how to select officers, how to organize a Presbytery, etc. The Book of Order is amended every two years when the General Assembly makes changes.

The other half of our constitution is the Book of Confessions. The Book of Confessions presently consists of twelve historical documents of our church. These documents are regarded as “subordinate standards.” That is, they are not equal to the authority of Jesus Christ or the scriptures. One cannot use one of these Confessions to argue against scripture. Scripture always supersedes the Confessions. The Confessions are subordinate. We also recognize that these documents are the products of their times and may be out of step with modern sensibilities. For example, the Scots Confession speaks only of men in the church. Today, we celebrate the equal place of men and women in our church. The Second Helvetic Confession makes statements about Jews and Muslims that today we should find distasteful. Each confession is a statement of faith from a particular time in history. Taken together, they are evidence that we are “The church reformed, always reforming.”

Today’s sermon is the fourth in a five-week series that I call “Truth At All Costs: Creeds of the Reformation.” In this series we are visiting the creeds and confessions which emerged from that period of church history we call the Protestant Reformation. The occasion for this series is that October 31st—two weeks from now—marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his 95 Theses in Wittenberg, Germany, outlining his complaints against the church’s selling of indulgences. Luther did not start the Reformation, but he certainly energized it. From Wittenberg, the demand for reform spread quickly across Europe.

On the back of your bulletin, next to each Confession, you will see the date that it was published. You will notice that the three we have looked at so far occurred within the span of a few years—the Scots Confession 1560, the Heidelberg Catechism 1563, and the Second Helvetic Confession 1566. Today, we are skipping

¹ 1 Corinthians 14:40

forward 80 years and stepping off of the European continent and sailing across the channel to Britain to look at the Westminster Confession of Faith.

It is now 1646—129 years since Martin Luther lit the fuse on the pent-up demand for Reform in Europe. Protestant churches have taken hold across the continent. Most of the theological issues in question have been settled, or, at least, the various parties agreed to disagree. Thanks to new translations, the Scriptures are no longer just printed in Latin, but now rest in the hands of the people. The controversies around the Lord's Supper and Baptism have largely been sorted out among the different churches. By this time, while Europe had mostly settled into Protestant or Catholic camps, in Scotland and England it was a bit different. In Britain, the most pressing question had to do with the church and power—specifically God's power. The people were wrestling with the question of how God's authority is made evident in the church. Does God's power come to the church through an individual appointed by God—in other words, a bishop? Or, is God's power found in leaders in church that the people have selected as to be their representatives—in other words, elders?

In England and Scotland this question had powerful political overtones. These nations at the time were ruled by monarchs. The basis of the power of monarchy is that these individuals have the power to rule because they have been chosen by God. This is medieval thinking that had continued into the 1500s. A monarch in God's person on Earth. Kings and queens are believed to rule at God's favor.

In England and Scotland, this was the question for the church, how did God's power flow? From the top down or from the bottom up? The English were comfortable with bishops. The Scots, however, argued for their Presbyterian government which they believe better reflected the statement by Jesus to *give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's*.

To be clear, this is a gross oversimplification of an incredibly complex political situation spanning decades. It began in 1534 when Henry VIII separated the English church from Rome. You had Catholics and Protestants monarchs vying for control. You had Puritans exerting dominant influence on the government in Parliament. The Puritans were those people who sought to purify the Church of England of all thing Catholic—or, as they said, “of all popery.” You had a treaty with the Scots to secure financing for a war, and more.

To solve this ecclesiastical dispute, the English Parliament appointed about 150 men that they called the Assembly of Divines to produce a document that would unify the Church of England. The members of this assembly were to meet at Westminster Abbey and they were to be “learned, Godly, and judicious.” They were to provide advice on issues of worship, doctrine, government, and discipline of the Church of England.

This Assembly of Divines met on and off for four years. In that time, they produced three documents: the Westminster Confession of Faith plus two catechisms—the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism. The Larger Catechism contains 196 questions and answers and was designed to be used by preachers to teach the Westminster Confession to their congregations. The Shorter Catechism was designed to teach the faith to children and contains 107 questions and answers. It is the Shorter Catechism that brings us that wonderful opening question, “What is the chief end of man?” and its answer “Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

The Westminster Confession itself consists of thirty-three chapters. The first chapter addresses Scripture, which is the source from which all other truths are derived. The Confession goes on to declare the sovereignty of God and the working of God's purpose in history. It talks of our falling into sin and God's covenant of redemption. It talks of Jesus Christ the mediator who is the way of salvation. The final chapters deal with the ethical dimensions of the Christian life as well as addressing the Sacraments.

The Church of Scotland adopted this Confession without amendment in 1647. The Scottish Parliament ratified it as well. The English Parliament ratified the document but only after a vigorous debate and several amendments. The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Presbyterian form of church government became the law of the land in England and lasted about ten years until the British monarchy was restored along with the episcopacy giving us the Anglican Church that we know today. Scotland, of course, remained staunchly Presbyterian. In 1672, the English imposed the Test Act which required adherence to the Church of England's 39 Articles as a requirement for holding civil office in England.

The Westminster Confession of Faith is one of the most influential of our Protestant documents. Its adoption in Scotland officially replaced the Scots Confession. For over 300 years the Westminster Confession was the sole doctrinal standard of British and American Presbyterians. It wasn't until the creation of the Book of Confessions in 1967 that we finally broadened our doctrinal base to include ancient creeds and non Anglo-Saxon confessions. In addition, the Westminster Confession of Faith had a powerful influence on the theology and politics of the emerging United States. In 1648, Massachusetts Congregationalists adopted a modified version of the Westminster Confession. Congregationalists in Connecticut did the same in 1707. American Baptists used the Westminster Confession as a basis for their Baptists Confession of 1742. You can see how the Westminster Confession of Faith became a notable influence on the new nation.

There's no doubt that Presbyterians with their Westminster Confession were a powerful voice in the foundation of this new nation. On the Declaration of Independence, twelve of the fifty-six signers were Presbyterian. A year before the Declaration of Independence was signed, Scots-Irish Presbyterians in Charlotte,

North Carolina, produced the Mecklenburg Declaration (May 20, 1775) which "by unanimous resolution declared the people free and independent, and that all laws and commissions from the king were henceforth null and void."²

It is no coincidence that the form of government adopted in the new world reflects the government of the Presbyterian church. We proclaim that the power of God is better expressed through the people, not through kings who claim they have been anointed by God. We have the freedom to elect a president. In the beginning, that was an extraordinarily radical idea. No other country was ruled in this way. You can see those Presbyterians looking back on their lives in England and Scotland and doing all they could to separate themselves from the yoke of monarchy. We do not choose our leaders because they are superior through accident of their birth. We proclaim that all are equal. And like Jesus we try not to "show deference" or "regard people with partiality."

These Confessions are important. We may not see them in our day-to-day expressions of faith but they will always be the foundations that support us. It is important that we study them, and read them, and not forget them. Our Confessions truly are gifts from God, and for them we can be thankful. Amen.

² <http://www.mipchurch.org/sermon/blame-it-on-the-presbyterians>