

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONFESSION

In 1643 the English Parliament called for an assembly of 'learned, godly and judicious Divines' (theologians) to meet in London in order to advise it on matters of **worship, doctrine** (teaching) **church government** and **discipline**.



Over a period of several years the assembly drew up a number of important documents. The meetings formally commenced on Saturday July 1, 1643 in Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster, and in September 1643 highly influential Commissioners from the Church of Scotland were added.

The documents produced included the Westminster Confession of Faith and two catechisms - Larger and Shorter. On August 27, 1647 the Church of Scotland adopted the Westminster Confession 'as to the truth of the matter' and as 'most agreeable to the word of God, and in nothing contrary to the received doctrine, worship, discipline and government of this Kirk.

The Westminster Confession is not a "denominational creed" since it has commended itself as an excellent statement of Christian truth to all who accept the authority of Scripture.

With some changes, mainly on church-state issues and the sacraments, Congregationalists (via the Savoy Declaration of 1658) and Baptists (via the Second London Confession of 1677/1689) have held the same doctrines, and the teaching is in line with the Thirty-nine Articles, the nominal creed of the Anglican Church.

The Confession outlines the major truths of scripture in thirty three chapters. It gives explanation of all essential doctrines, including; the place of the bible in life and worship, the work and person of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the nature of Salvation, Law, Divine Grace, Church life and Judgement.

The Westminster assemble were reluctant to include scriptural "proofs" in its confession and only did so at the insistence of the English Parliament. However, the scriptural texts do show the total "scripturalness" of the Confession and should be read and carefully considered.

The Westminster Confession of Faith is still regarded as one of the most accurate and well produced statements regarding the Christian Faith ever written. Its usefulness as a guide to understanding Reformed Christianity and the doctrines (teachings) of the bible is seen in its longevity and its continued use amongst many denominations today.



# THIS WE BELIEVE ABOUT...

## THE WESTMINSTER



## CONFESSION OF FAITH

*"Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers."*  
1 Timothy 4:16

Sources: S. Olyott Sermon Series on WCF and "The Westminster Confession of Faith Study Series" by J.A. Pipa, JR.

# THE CONFESSION

## WHAT IS THE CONFESSION AND WHAT GOOD DOES IT SERVE?

The Westminster Confession is a formal public Statement expressing the leading doctrines of the Christian Faith. It has a two-fold reference to the outside world and to the Church within.

To the outside world it makes public the substance of the Church's beliefs so that all who care to learn may understand them. It also presents them with a worldview which stands in opposition to all other worldviews. Within the Church itself it serves as a test for people holding office within the congregation. Those who hold office in the Church are required to uphold its principles.

For the congregation it also serves as a bond of fellowship between members, a means of settling disputes and controversies on points of doctrine, and a basis of union or reunion among Christian bodies who are willing to subscribe to its articles of faith.

Thus, confessions were employed by the disciples. (1 John 4:2-3).



The Confession is referred to as a Church's 'subordinate standard' because it is subordinate to the Scriptures, the fountainhead of all revealed truth.

This subordination, however, does not effect its authority in matters of faith, but rather serves to emphasise the fact that it is derived from Scripture.

Establishing the truth and opposing error are intrinsic in the proclamation of the gospel (2 Cor 10:5; Gal 2:5; Phil 1:7).

Throughout history, Confessions and creeds have been used as a way of preserving truth in the face of false teaching and as a means of disciplining families. The goal of any good Confession is to Magnify the truth and through instruction, equip the Saints to be well grounded and settled in their defense of the faith. (1 Pet 3:15)

## SOME FUNCTIONS OF THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION

### TO UPHOLD SCRIPTURE (ISA 8:18-20)

The primary purpose of a Confession is to point people to the scriptures as the source of authority in all matters of faith and life.

A truly biblical Confession derives its authority from scripture, not Popes or Councils.

For this reason, the Westminster Assembly (1643-47) showed great discernment in placing the subject of the Scriptures first in its Confession.

### AS AN AID TO UNITY AND FELLOWSHIP (2 JOHN 1:8-11)

A church with a Confession is saying that individualistic interpretation of the scripture is divisive. It is in the community of faith that we learn, encourage, build up and confess our allegiance to Jesus Christ with one voice.

### TO INSTRUCT PEOPLE IN THE TEACHINGS OF SCRIPTURE (2 TIM 3:16)

A Confession is not designed to overcome the disputes of every minor difference in a church community. Instead it is designed to guide and instruct the church in the grand, clearly revealed truths and teachings of the bible.

Solid teaching that rightly divides the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15) leads to a solid faith. The use of Catechisms and Confessions as an aid to instruction has demonstrated this throughout history.

### TO MAINTAIN A CLEAR VIEW OF HISTORICAL CHRISTIANITY (JER 6:16)

It is the nature of man to discard "the old", but that is not the nature of God. Truth is truth. We are encouraged by scripture to learn truth, systematically (Lk 1:4; Acts 18:25; 2Tim 1:13) and remind ourselves daily of the truths that God has revealed throughout history.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, though not perfect, is considered to be among the finest theological works ever written. Like the Israelites who were to be constantly reminded of God's hand in their history (Ex 20:2), we can also be encouraged and built up in our faith by learning from those who have faithfully trod the path before us.