

Westminster

A review of the Westminster Confession

Week 1: History and Context • **Week 2: Sola Scriptura** • Week 3: Sovereignty of God

Week 4: Covenant Life • Week 5: A Living Faith

What is a Confession

Definition

In a religious context, a statement setting out essential religious doctrine, a creed; a statement of one's principles in any matter.

Role in the Presbyterian Church

- The PC(USA) affirms 10 confessions including Westminster. The Nicene Creed (325 AD) is the oldest. The Brief Statement of Faith (1987) is the newest.
- Through its confessions, the PC(USA) “declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes and what it resolves to do.” They:
 - o Guide the church in its study and interpretation of scripture
 - o Summarize the essence of the Reformed Christian tradition
 - o Direct the church in maintaining strong doctrines
 - o Equip the church for its ministry of proclamation.
 - o Reflect the time and place and situation of the authors.
 - o They affirm a common faith tradition while also at times standing in tension with each other.
- The confessions are subordinate standards in the church, subject to Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness.
- The church only adopts a document as a confession after an intense period of study and multiple votes (each requiring a 2/3 majority) over several years.

PC(USA) Book of Order F-2

Adoption of Westminster

In 1729 Presbyterians in the American colonies adopt the Westminster Confession as their sole standard of faith, requiring all Presbyterian ministers to declare the Confession “as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine.” Presbyterians had been among the colonists at both Jamestown and Plymouth and American congregations began using Westminster shortly after its publication.

The Versions of Westminster

- 1647 – the original version published by the Westminster Assembly, approved by the English Parliament and adopted by the Church of Scotland. Where the main text differs from the original text the Book of Confessions references the 1647 text in the footnotes.
- Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (1789) – an “Americanized” version adopted after the Revolutionary War. This version was still in use when the church split prior to the Civil War and remained in use by the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS – Southern Church) until 1987.

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- United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (1958) – At various points after 1861 the UPCUSA (Northern Church) amended the 1789 version of the confession. Where this version differs from the 1789 version used by the PCUS the Book of Confessions prints both side by side. It was last amended in 1958.
- The PC(USA), formed in 1987 by the merger of the PCUS and the UPCUSA, has never reconciled the two versions.
- Modern English Study Version (1993) – A version of the confession in more contemporary language prepared by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. This study uses this version when quoting the Confession.

Shortly after Westminster's publication in 1647 other Protestant churches began to adapt Westminster for their use. In 1648 Puritans in both England and America had adopted a version of Westminster adapted to favor congregationalism. In 1707 the Baptists in America had adopted a version favoring adult baptism.

Structure of the Confession

33 chapters divided into five sections.

Section 1 – Chapter I (1)

- Scripture, the source of all truth

Section 2 – Chapters II – V (2-5)

- The sovereignty of God; God's plans and purposes displayed in creation of the world and God's care for all people.

Section 3 – Chapters VI – XX (6-20)

- God's relationship with humanity
 - o Human sinfulness & God desire for redemption
 - o Jesus as savior
 - o The way of salvation

Section 4 – Chapters XXI – XXVI (21-26)

- The Christian life

Section 5 – Chapters XXVII – XXXV (27-35)*

- Church, sacraments and last things

* Due to differences between the PCUS and the UPCUSA versions, the Westminster Confession as printed in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions has 35 chapters.

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Chapter I – Of the Holy Scripture

The Bible on the Bible

2 Timothy 3:14-17

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Galatians 1:11-12

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Yet among the mature we do not speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written -

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”

- these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

Questions

1. What is the purpose of scripture?
2. Where does scripture come from?

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3. How do we know the meaning of scripture?

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Westminster on the Bible (Ch. 1, ¶ 5, 6, 10)

5. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to a high and reverent esteem for the Holy Scripture. ... Nevertheless, our full persuasion and assurance of its infallible truth and divine authority is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

6. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory and humanity's salvation, faith and life is either expressly stated in Scripture or by good and necessary inference may be deduced from Scripture unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or by human tradition. Nevertheless, we acknowledge there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and the government of the church – circumstances common to human activities 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.

10. The supreme judge by whom all controversies of religion are to be settled and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, human doctrines, and claims to private revelations are to be examined, can be only the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. With the Spirit's decisions are we to be satisfied.

Questions

1. Does scripture have authority over the church or does the church have authority over scripture? Why?
2. What does Paragraph 6 state about the role of scripture in our lives and in the church?
3. How are we to discern those things not necessarily mentioned in scripture?
4. Name a “general rule” of the Word.
5. What should you always take to a church fight? Why?
6. What is the significance of putting this chapter first?

Which Came First? Scripture or the Church?

Johann Eck – Early 16th Century Catholic theologian

“The church is older than Scripture, for when the apostles began to preach, there was no written gospel, no letter of Paul, and yet there was the church dedicated by Christ's blood.”

Johannes Scharpius – Early 17th Century Protestant theologian

Scripture, or the Word of God, is the foundation of the church. The Word of God is the seed from which the church grows; the seed is older than its progeny.

Quotes from Fesko, p. 74

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From J. V. Fesko:

“Going back to [the earliest days of the Reformation] Reformed theologians explained the nature of the Word in terms of the unwritten and written word. This was an important distinction, one that emphasized that God’s spoken Word took precedence over his written Word. It might not be immediately apparent, but giving priority to the unwritten (or spoken) Word of God meant that the Word of God existed first, prior to the church. By contrast, Roman Catholics argued that the church existed first and then created the Word. If the church existed first, then its authority was equal to that of Scripture; but if the Word existed first, then the church, naturally, was the product of the Word and hence subject to its authority.”

p. 72-3

Westminster’s Proof Texts

- As much as possible, Westminster’s authors rooted every thought (sometimes every word) in scripture.
- There are over 2,000 separate scripture citations in the Confession.

Example: Ch. 1, ¶ 6

(Same as above, but 1647 text with scripture proofs. Scriptures are quoted from the King James Bible, published in 1611)

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: (Mark 7:5-7) unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. (See note.) 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; (John 6:45, 1 Cor. 9:12) 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. (1 Cor. 14:26, 40; 11:13-14)

Mark 7:5-7

⁵ Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands?

⁶ He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

⁷ Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men

Note

This statement is an inference from the sufficiency of the Scriptures.

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John 6:45

⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me.

1 Corinthians 9:12

¹² If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ.

1 Corinthians 14:26, 40

²⁶ How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.

⁴⁰ Let all things be done decently and in order.

1 Corinthians 11:13-14

¹³ Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?

¹⁴ Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?

Resources

For the official Presbyterian version of the Westminster Confession:

Book of Confessions, PC(USA)

For historical & theological background

Fesko, J.V., The Theology of the Westminster Standards (Crossway Books, 2014)

Rogers, Jack, Presbyterian Creeds (Westminster Press, 1985)