

The Westminster Confession of Faith

(Introduction © Arthur J. Smith)

At the pinnacle of the Puritan-dominated Republican State in seventeenth century England, a group of Bible scholars known as the *Westminster Assembly* met under authority of the English Parliament to formulate a reformed statement of the Christian faith. The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, as it was referred to, is a systematic exposition of Pauline-Augustinian-Calvinistic doctrine. It was first completed in 1646 AD, whereupon it was submitted to the English Parliament. However, the Parliament insisted that specific Scripture proofs must be added to all parts of it before it would give its final approval. Although the clerics had written the document based upon their carefully considered opinion of the greater context of Scripture supported by many individual Bible references, it then became necessary for them to locate and record specific proofs of Scripture for every individual point set forth in their statements. The final document containing exhaustive Scriptural proofs was completed and approved on April 29, 1647. The fact that very specific references had to be added to an already completed text accounts for the sometimes oblique references to particular words and short phrases, which are exclusively taken from the text of the *Authorized King James Version* of the Bible.

A few notes are in order regarding this document: First, the word “catholic” is used in this document only in the sense of the Church being “universal;” it does not in any way imply formal ties with the Roman church by that name. There are a few statements within this document, which deviate from a comprehensively biblical reformed doctrine, that need to be mentioned. (1) There are numerous statements that refer to the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week, as the “Sabbath Day” (cf. Chapter 21), which was the last day of the week and observed exclusively by the Jew, not by Christians. (2) This document takes an extremely “high view” of the temporal church. When speaking of the church in Chapter 25, paragraph 2, it states, “...out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” Many come to Christ prior to any formal relationship with a temporal church as the Holy Spirit baptizes them into the Church universal through a spiritual rebirth from above. Nevertheless, the word “ordinary” in this statement does at least concede the possibility of the salvation of men apart from a prior membership in a temporal church.

There are also two very significant deviations from a comprehensively reformed view concerning church practice found in this document, which are carried over largely unreformed from Roman Catholic dogma: (1) effusion (sprinkling or pouring) is prescribed as a proper mode of ritual baptism, and (2) the practice of baptizing male and female infants, who have no ability to profess a personal faith in Christ, is encouraged on the basis of establishing a new-covenant identity for them with the church similar to that which old-covenant circumcision identified male infants with the nation of Israel (Chapter 28 paragraphs 3 and 4). It should be further noted that the Eschatology of the seventeenth century lacked a prophetic understanding of the Book of Revelation. It therefore had no biblical foundation for a future “rapture” of the Church occurring prior to the return of Christ to execute his fierce judgments upon the reprobate inhabitants of the earth. Likewise, it dismisses the existence of a future Millennial Kingdom age upon the earth with Christ personally reigning as its King in the city of Jerusalem.

The Westminster Confession of faith is the foundational document for many reformed Christian denominations – particularly Episcopal and Presbyterian churches that hold to the deviations just mentioned. Nevertheless, this document remains the most carefully considered and complete statement of the reformed doctrine of salvation to be found anywhere today. Excluding the four before mentioned deviations, other portions of this confession concerning reformed Soteriology and the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, are often referred to by sound evangelical reformed Christians of many other denominational and non-denominational backgrounds because of its profound clarity of thought.

This document is currently available via the Internet where it may be read and studied in its entirety by clicking on the following external Web link: [Westminster Confession](#)