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LOVING THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION AND CATECHISMS

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INTRODUCTION

When James Henley Thornwell was inaugurated as professor at Columbia Seminary in 1855, he was asked the question, “Do you accept the Westminster Confession?” “Accept it?” he replied. “I love it! I love it with all my heart!”¹

Writing a few years earlier, Princeton Seminary’s Archibald Alexander explained why we love the Westminster Confession and Catechisms:

We venerate these standards, partly because they embody the wisdom of an august Synod; because they come down to us associated with the memory and faith of saints and martyrs and embalmed with their blood; but we love them most of all because they contain the truth of God—that truth which forms the foundation of our hopes. As our fathers prized them, and we prize them, so may our children and our children’s children love and preserve them.²

For generations, Scottish children were brought up, it was said, on porridge and the Shorter Catechism—a blessing for both heart and mind. Oatmeal is now touted as one of the most heart-healthy foods we can eat. And the discipline of learning the Shorter Catechism strengthened generations of Scottish minds; its contents laid what John G. Paton (nineteenth-century missionary to the New Hebrides from Scotland’s Reformed Presbyterian Church) called “the solid rock-foundations” of their Christian lives.³

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¹ See B. M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (1875; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 545–46.

² Archibald Alexander, “Westminster Assembly of Divines,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 15, no. 4 (October 1843): 586.

³ James Paton, ed., *John G. Paton—Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography* (1889; repr. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 16.

I don't know whether or not Scottish children got tired of porridge every morning, but some, probably many, grew weary of the catechism. One who did, although he could never escape its haunting words, was Robert Lewis Stevenson. "The happiest lot on earth is to be born a Scotchman," wrote Stevenson; "[but] you must pay for it in many ways, as for all other advantages on earth. You have to learn the [Psalm] paraphrases and the Shorter Catechism."⁴

Many children in early America learned the catechism. The famous *New England Primer*, for more than a hundred years the beginning textbook for America's schoolchildren, contained the Shorter Catechism. In an 1843 printing of the *Primer* we read:

Our Puritan fathers brought the Shorter Catechism with them across the ocean and laid it on the same shelf with the family Bible. They taught it diligently to their children. . . . If in this catechism the true and fundamental doctrines of the Gospel are expressed in fewer and better words and definitions than in any other summary, why ought we not now to train up a child in the way he should go?⁵

Times have changed, and today very few children—indeed, very few Presbyterian children—learn the catechism. There were eighteen students in my class on the Westminster Confession of Faith at Covenant Theological Seminary during a recent semester. Only four of those eighteen young people grew up in Presbyterian homes, and only one of those four had learned the Shorter Catechism as a child. He, by the way, still had it word perfect.

A 1953 editorial in *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* paid tribute to what it called an "almost departed" friend—the Westminster Shorter Catechism. "The document is a relic of ecclesiastical aristocracy and holds a secure high place in Presbyterian history," the editorial stated. "In some respects it is like the grandfather's clock that stands on the stairway landing, 'grim and unyielding,' defying removal, a valued heirloom, *but isn't running anymore.*"⁶

But the old documents produced by the Westminster divines in the 1640s are still alive, still running, still helping us know what "time" it is. The Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms set forth the "doctrinal standards" of the Presbyterian Church in America—and of many other Presbyterian denominations around the world. The Westminster Assembly Project, which includes the publication of several volumes of essays under the title *The Westminster*

⁴ See Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Foreigner at Home," in *Stevenson's Scottish Stories and Essays*, Kenneth Gelder, ed., (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), 239.

⁵ *The New-England Primer* (1777; repr. Alledo, TX: Wall-Builder Press, 1991), (4).

⁶ Wade C. Smith, "Bringing the Skeleton Out of the Closet," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 12, no. 11 (July 15, 1953): 2.

Confession into the 21st Century as well as the minutes and papers of the Westminster Assembly, is an encouraging development for those who love the Westminster Standards.

One of the students in my Westminster Confession class at Covenant Seminary, Kris Holroyd, was married on Monday, January 30, 2006, to his fiancée, Jone, who had just arrived from Lithuania the day before. The next day, the newlyweds were both in the Westminster Confession class! Chris and Jone plan to return to Europe to serve God there. Jone has been translating the Westminster Confession of Faith into Lithuanian. "This confession," she says, "is a wonderful study for Christians at home for their better understanding of the Reformed faith."⁷ Yes, the old clock is still running! It is still keeping "theological time" for many—and for some, like Christians in Lithuania, it is something new and exciting.

We are rightly concerned to try to better understand what the Westminster Confession and Catechisms say and what they mean. I am thankful for every article, every book, every lecture that helps us to better grasp the meaning of these important documents. I want to suggest two reasons why we *love* the Westminster Confession and Catechisms—which our American church fathers in 1729 called "good forms of sound words" about what we are "to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of [us]."

We love the Westminster Standards not as we love the Bible—"the law of the Lord is perfect" (Ps. 19:7)—but as "a help" in faith and practice (as the Confession itself teaches in chapter 31). When students at Columbia Seminary asked Dr. William Childs Robinson if the Westminster Standards were perfect, he would often reply, "No, but their exposition of faith is better than yours, and you can improve yours by studying theirs."⁸

I. THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS HELP TO FORM OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH BY TEACHING US WHAT WE ARE TO BELIEVE CONCERNING GOD AND ALL THINGS

During an evening walk in Columbia, South Carolina, young James Henley Thornwell happened into a bookstore and found lying on the counter a small volume entitled *Confession of Faith*. He bought it for twenty-five cents, carried it home, and read it from beginning to end. The Westminster Confession of Faith clarified his thinking about God and set him on a theological path from which he never turned.⁹ Years later, he praised the Westminster Confession and Catechisms for their

⁷ *ITEM Newsitens* (Spring 2006): 4.

⁸ David B. Calhoun, "'Doctor Robbie': William Childs Robinson (1897–1982) of Columbia Theological Seminary," in *Confessing Our Hope: Essays Celebrating the Life and Ministry of Morton H. Smith*, Joseph A. Pipa Jr. and C. N. Willborn, eds., (Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2004), 277.

⁹ Palmer, *Life of James Henley Thornwell*, 80.

"richness of matter, clearness of statement, soundness of doctrine, scriptural expression, and edifying tendency."¹⁰

Writing about Jonathan Edwards, Max Stackhouse states that the Puritans—such as those seventeenth-century pastors who drew up the Westminster Confession and Catechisms—were "earnest folk" who wanted people to "find a confidence for living in this precarious world. Those in drift could not do that; they were like a bug on a leaf in a river during a storm. They had no sense of where they were or where they were going."¹¹

In reading the *New York Times Book Review* every week, I am continually impressed with what a precarious and confusing world we live in. It is with relief and joy that I can turn from the wisdom of this world to the wisdom of God as found in his Word and summed up in the Westminster Standards.

Reviews of books on evolution do not create confusion because I know that God made "all things of nothing, by the word of his power, in the space of six days, and all very good" (Westminster Shorter Catechism question [WSC] #9).

Troubling accounts of natural and human disasters are seen in the light of God's providence: "His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions" (WSC #11).

Shocking stories of human depravity sadden but do not surprise me because I know that "the fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery" (WSC #17).

Book after book by authors searching for the secret of human happiness miss the main point—which is that "man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever" (WSC #1).

Death—a topic of both dread and fascination for modern people and explored in many books, such as Joan Didion's *Year of Magical Thinking*—holds no terror for the Christian. When Alexander Whyte came as Dr. Candlish's assistant to Free St. George's in Edinburgh—the church he would pastor for nearly fifty years—he visited one of the church's elders, who was dying. The godly old man had a book open on his pillow. Can you guess what it was? You never would! It was the Westminster Confession of Faith, open to its great chapter on Justification by Faith. "I am dying on that gospel chapter," he told the young minister. Whyte read aloud the much-loved words:

Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and

¹⁰ Ibid., 165.

¹¹ Max L. Stackhouse, *Christian Century* 120, no. 20 (October 4, 2003): 32.

resting on Him and His righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

When Alexander Whyte finished reading the rest of chapter 11, the elder fell asleep in Jesus.¹²

Without the words of Scripture—set forth in summary by the words of Westminster—we would be like a bug on a leaf in a river during a storm. We would have no sense of who we are or where we are going. Many people, however, prefer to make their own way rather than being guided by an ancient statement such as the Westminster Confession of Faith. Stephen J. Duffy, a professor at Loyola University in New Orleans, sums up the modern distaste for creeds and confessions:

Creeds do not sit well with such disparate elements as Enlightenment antidogmatic rationalism, liberal Protestantism, evangelical Christianity, nor with modern individualism and secular relativism.¹³

Not only is secular rationalism an enemy of doctrinal assertions like those of the Westminster Standards, but also some forms of Christianity—liberal Protestantism and even evangelical Christianity, Duffy notes—minimize creeds and confessions. Liberal Protestants long ago relegated their doctrinal standards to books of confessions, of interest mainly for historical research. Some evangelical Christians also distrust creeds, stressing that what people need is not doctrine but a personal relationship to God through Christ, followed by a life of good works.

Over fifty years ago, Dorothy Sayers, in an essay entitled “Creed or Chaos?” warned that:

It is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality, unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is vitally necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe. It is hopeless to offer Christianity as a vaguely idealistic aspiration of a simple and consoling kind; it is, on the contrary, a hard, tough, exacting, and complex doctrine, steeped in a drastic and uncompromising realism. And it is fatal to imagine that everybody knows quite well what Christianity is and needs only a little encouragement to practice it. The brutal fact is that in this Christian country not one person in a

¹² Robert S. Rayburn, “The Christian’s Greatest Means of Grace,” *Presbyterian* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 4, 5.

¹³ Stephen J. Duffy, “Creeds and Confessions of Faith: From Ages of Belief to an Age of Creedal Malaise,” *Religious Studies Review* 31, nos. 1 and 2 (January & April 2005): 43.

hundred has the faintest notion what the church teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

I love the Westminster Standards because they help me to know God's truth in a secular world that hates absolute truth, and in a religious world that distrusts theological propositions.

There is another reason why I love the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. The truth found in these old documents not only feeds our minds, it also shapes our lives.

The confession is both propositional and personal; it is both communication and communion. We "receive and rest upon" Christ alone for salvation, not upon a proposition, but we need the propositions in order to know the person. We need to know "who is the Redeemer of God's elect" and "how Christ, being the Son of God, became man." It is upon this One, and not another, that we rest.

II. THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS HELP TO FORM OUR CHRISTIAN CHARACTER BY TEACHING US WHAT DUTY GOD REQUIRES OF US

B. B. Warfield writes about an officer of the United States Army who was in a western city during a time of violent rioting. One day this officer saw approaching him a man whose very appearance of calm and resolve inspired confidence. The two men passed each other, then each stopped to look back at the other. The stranger came back to the officer and, touching the officer's chest with his forefinger, demanded without introduction, "What is the chief end of man?" On receiving the answer, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever," the stranger said, "Ah, I knew you were a Shorter Catechism boy by your looks!" "Why, that was just what I was thinking of you," came the answer.¹⁵

While it may be impossible to tell whether a person knows the catechism simply by his or her looks, the true knowledge of its contents will produce in one's life a demonstration of Christian character. It will be, as the confession states in chapter 31, a help to both faith (what we believe) and practice (how we live).

Beliefs without appropriate actions—creeds without deeds—are indeed empty, or worse, deadly; and conduct or actions without a basis in belief—deeds without creeds—are directionless, or worse, dangerous. The Westminster Confession notes that what makes deeds Christian is that they proceed "from a heart purified by faith," they are done "in a right manner according to the Word," and they are done "to a right end,

¹⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, "Creed or Chaos?" in *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 31.

¹⁵ B. B. Warfield, "Is the Shorter Catechism Worth While?" in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970) 1:383–84.

the glory of God." Faith is the basis of good works, the word of God is their norm, and the glory of God their end or goal (WCF 16.7).

In *Credo*, the accompanying final volume of his magisterial *Creeeds and Confessions of Faith*, Jaroslav Pelikan argues that "far from encouraging moral lassitude on the grounds that only true doctrine matters . . . a passionate zeal for orthodoxy has historically become a special cause for those who have consecrated their lives" to good works.¹⁶ In other words, deeds follow and accompany creeds. Those who are truly concerned for godly living have throughout history demonstrated "a passionate zeal for orthodoxy."

In her book *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine*, Princeton Seminary Professor Ellen T. Charry claims that Christian doctrines are "good for us by forming or reforming our character." She shows how theologians such as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Calvin, and others "understood human happiness to be tied to virtuous character, which in turn comes from knowing God." In these older theological writings, Charry asserts, "evangelism, catechesis, moral exhortation, dogmatic exegesis, pastoral care, and apologetics were all happening at the same time."¹⁷

This is certainly true of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. They lead us to true knowledge of God and also enable us to realize "our chief end" in life, which is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him." In other words, sound, biblical theology honors and glorifies God and is at the same time good for us.

In his opening address to the Princeton Seminary students on September 20, 1903, B. B. Warfield recommended some books that the students should read in order to nurture their spiritual life. He ended, somewhat surprisingly, with the statement that the creeds of Christendom are "more directly, richly, and evangelically devotional" than any other writings, apart from the Bible. He recommended especially the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism. Warfield said: "He who wishes to grow strong in his religious life, let him, I say, next to the Bible, feed himself on the great Creeds of the Church." They are not "metaphysical speculation," said Warfield, but "compressed and weighted utterances of the Christian heart."¹⁸

James Henley Thornwell found the Westminster documents to be not only an incomparable statement of biblical truth but also a rich source of spiritual nourishment. During his 1841 voyage to Europe, Thornwell wrote on May 22:

¹⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Creeeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 4:300.

¹⁷ Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), vii, viii.

¹⁸ B. B. Warfield, "Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1973) 2:492-94.

It is now Saturday night, and I must prepare for the holy Sabbath. My Bible and Confession of Faith are my traveling companions, and precious friends they have been to me. I bless God for that glorious summary of Christian doctrine contained in our noble standards. It has cheered my soul in many a dark hour, and sustained me in many a desponding moment. I love to read it, and ponder carefully each proof-text as I pass along.¹⁹

During a period of intensive chemotherapy treatment some years ago, I found that it helped to walk. Day after day I walked around and around a half-mile path in Conway Park, across the street from the Covenant Seminary campus. I took with me a copy of the Shorter Catechism and a book of poems. I read the poems and the catechism answers, slowly, out loud. As the chemotherapy each week flowed into my body in the hospital next to the park, so the good words of the catechism flowed into my heart and mind every day. I experienced what Dr. Warfield did when he commented on chapters 17 and 18 of the Westminster Confession. "Who can read those searching chapters on perseverance and assurance," Warfield asked, "without feeling his soul burn within him, or without experience of a new influx of courage and patience for the conflicts of life?"²⁰

CONCLUSION

We love the Westminster Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms because they tell us in thirty-three chapters and in over three hundred questions and answers how we can "glorify God and enjoy him forever." They tell us what to believe and how to live. They preserve and set forth "the precious Gospel . . . in their protecting envelope of sound words."²¹

¹⁹ Palmer, *Life of James Henley Thornwell*, 162.

²⁰ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Significance of the Westminster Standards as a Creed* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1898), 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 36.