Westminster Confession of Faith

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The Westminster Confession of Faith is a Reformed confession of faith, in the Calvinist theological tradition. Although drawn up by the 1646 Westminster Assembly largely of the Church of England, it became, and remains the 'subordinate standard' of doctrine in the Church of Scotland and has been influential within Presbyterian churches worldwide (with various changes it has also been adopted by some Congregationalists and even Baptists).

In 1643, the English Parliament called upon "learned, godly and judicious Divines", to meet at Westminster Abbey in order to provide advice on issues of worship, doctrine, government and discipline of the Church of England. Their meetings, over a period of five years, produced the Confession of Faith, as well as a Larger Catechism and a Shorter Catechism. For more than three centuries, various churches around the world have adopted the Confession and the Catechisms as their standards of doctrine, subordinate to the Bible.

Historical situation

During the English Civil War (1642-1649), the English parliament raised armies in an alliance with the Covenanters who by then were the de facto government of Scotland, against the forces of the king, Charles I of England. The purpose of the Westminster Assembly, in which 121 Puritan clergymen participated, was to provide official documents for the reformation of the Church of England. The Church of Scotland had recently overthrown its bishops and adopted presbyterianism (see Bishops' Wars). For this reason, as a condition for entering into the alliance with England, the Scottish Parliament formed the Solemn League and Covenant with the English Parliament, which meant that the Church of England would abandon episcopalianism and consistently adhere to Calvinistic standards of doctrine and worship. The Confession and Catechisms were produced in order to secure the help of the Scots against the king.

The Scottish Commissioners who were present at the Assembly were satisfied with the Confession of Faith, and in 1646, the document was sent to the English parliament to be ratified, and submitted to the General Assembly of the Scottish Kirk. The Church of Scotland adopted the document, without amendment, in 1647. In England, the House of Commons returned the document to the Assembly with the requirement to compile a list of proof texts from Scripture. After vigorous debate, the Confession was then in part adopted as the Articles of Christian Religion in 1648, by act of the English parliament, omitting some sections and chapters. The next year, the Scottish parliament ratified the Confession without amendment.

In 1660, the restoration of the British monarchy and of the Anglican episcopacy resulted in the nullification of these acts of the two parliaments. However, when William of Orange replaced the Roman Catholic King James II of England, he gave royal sanction to Scottish parliament's ratification of the Confession, again without change, in 1690.

Contents

The confession is a systematic exposition of Calvinist orthodoxy (which neo-orthodox (Barthian) scholars routinely refer to as, 'scholastic Calvinism'), influenced by Puritan and covenant theology.

Its more controversial features include: double predestination (held alongside freedom of choice); the covenant of works with Adam; the Puritan doctrine that assurance of salvation is different or separable from saving faith, a minimalist conception of the Regulative principle of worship; and a Sabbatarian view of Sunday.

Even more controversially, it states that the Pope is the Antichrist, that the Roman Catholic mass is a form of idolatry, and rules out marriage with non-Christians. These formulations were repudiated by the Church of Scotland in the 1980s, but they remain part of the official doctrine of some other Presbyterian churches.

American Presbyterian Adoption and Revisions

The first American Presbyterian ministers were New England Congregationalists, whose congregations originated with the migration from New England to the Dutch colony as early as the 1640s, and Presbyterian immigrants from Scotland, Ireland and Wales. The first American presbytery, uniting some of
these independent congregations and those of the British immigrants, was formed in 1706. This body grew large enough to form the first Synod in Philadelphia in 1716. Prior to 1729, some presbyteries required candidates for the ministry to profess adherence to the Westminster Confession. When the Synod of Philadelphia met in 1729 to adopt the Westminster Confession as the doctrinal standard, it required all ministers to declare their approval of the Westminster Confession of Faith and catechisms. At the same time, the Adopting Act allowed candidates and ministers to scruple articles within the Confession. Whether or not the article scrupled was essential or nonessential was judged by the presbyter. This allowance implied a difference, within the standards themselves, between things that are essential and necessary to the Christian faith, and things that are not. This compromise left a permanent legacy to following generations of Presbyterians, to decide what is meant by "essential and necessary", resulting in permanent controversies over the manner in which a minister is bound to accept the document; and it has left the American versions of the Westminster Confession more amenable to the will of the church to amend it.

The 1789 American Revision

The revisions of 1787–1789 removed certain powers of the civil government over the church, which might be called theocratic principles, from the Westminster Confession of faith and catechisms. It also removes explicit identification of the Pope as the Antichrist.

1903 PCUSA Revision

Between 1861 and 1983, the northern Presbyterian church (PCUSA) was separated from the southern church (PCUS). In 1903, the PCUSA adopted revisions to the Westminster Confession of Faith that were intended to soften the church's commitment to Calvinism. These revisions paved the way to the partial re- merger of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church with the PCUSA - a division which had persisted since 1810.

The Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910

In 1910, the PCUSA attempted to specify that a supernatural perspective is necessary and essential, according to the Bible and the Westminster standards. This perspective was articulated in terms of five doctrinal issues:

1. The divine inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible.
2. The pre-existence, deity, and virgin birth of Jesus.
3. The satisfaction of God's justice by the crucifixion of Christ (substitutionary atonement).
4. The resurrection, ascension and intercession of Jesus.
5. The reality of the miracles of Jesus.

The Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910 marks the formal beginning of the conflict between Christian fundamentalism and Modernist Christianity in the PCUSA, which had been developing in that church since the 1890s. In 1928 the Deliverance was rejected by the PCUSA, resulting in an exodus of a large number conservatives (including J. Gresham Machen, who went on to found the Orthodox Presbyterian Church which many of the former PCUSA ministers and laity joined), ending the controversy in the PCUSA in favor of the liberals.