

Sabbath School

Topic: WCF Intro (2): Historical Context (Gal. 5.1; Isa. 51.1; 1Cor. 3.9-15)

Date: 2/16/20

§1. Introduction

The Westminster Assembly was an assembly of theologians, called by the English Parliament, in order to reform the Church of England, which had been, at best, partially reformed but full of many corruptions. The Assembly was made up of about 121 English ministers, 30 laymen (who were members of parliament), and a delegation of 6 Scottish ministers, and 9 Scottish ruling Elders from the Church of Scotland as non-voting commissioners.

The Westminster Assembly wrote a Confession of Faith and two Catechisms, Larger and Shorter, which are all part of the Constitution of the RPCNA. Additionally, it produced a Directory for Publick Worship, Directory for Family Worship, and a Form of Presbyterial Church Government. Additionally the Assembly spent a great deal of time seeking to reform the pulpits of England through the examination of existing pastors, and their removal upon discovery of defect or scandal, as well as the examination of new preachers.

Two weeks ago we briefly discussed how the Assembly was called in fulfillment of the Solemn League and Covenant, an agreement between England and Scotland, to bring about reformation in England and unity between the two national churches in doctrine, worship, and government. Today we will briefly look at some more of the history surrounding the Westminster Confession.

Why Study the History of the WCF?

Our goal this morning is not to delve into a detailed history of the Westminster Assembly—that is impossible in 35 minutes. Rather our goal is to provide a broad, general overview of the historical context in which the Confession was written, in order to provide motivation for studying it.

In order to better understand both the content and the importance of the WCF, some knowledge of its history within its intellectual and socio-political context is required. This document did not fall down from heaven, but was written by an Assembly of English Churchmen, called by the English Parliament, amidst civil war, in resistance to a king desiring to usurp authority in the Church, with the aim of unity with the Church of Scotland and conformity to other Reformed churches, and at the apex of the theological development of Reformation theology. All of these factors are important to consider before we begin to properly study the text of the Confession itself.

Furthermore, we need to be mindful of the sacrifices our ecclesiastical forefathers made in order to hold to the Doctrine and Manner of Worship which we are so prone to take for granted and make light of. The Devil is wise and subtle; he adapts his methods as the circumstances require. When he can use kings and governments to corrupt the worship of God, he will—and he did. At other times, as in our time and context, he will use so-called freedom of religion to ease the

people into a state of laxity concerning the worship of God. As a result, Presbyterians today will engage in such corruptions of God's worship as Presbyterians of old would have died to oppose!

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. (Gal. 5.1)

Christ has made us free from all forms carnal ordinances of worship as were under the Old Testament (such as holy days, or the use of musical instruments in worship), and from the doctrines and commandments of men. The Bible commands us to stand fast in that liberty, and forbids us from entangling ourselves in it. Christian liberty forbids us from putting ourselves under bondage. We must look at how Christ has providentially made the Church free from the tyranny of the Papacy during the Reformation, and stand fast in that liberty. We are therefore obligated to not entangle ourselves in the bondage of Popish doctrine, worship, or holy days.

Why should we care about purity of doctrine and worship? First of all, because of the Word of God commands it. But the faithfulness of our forefathers also bears witness to our duty to pursue the purity of the Church, and acts as a secondary injunction upon us. If others died, and even to this day die, in order to read the Bible in their own language, how dare we neglect our Bibles which we have so freely, not only in print, but also on our phones, while we indulge ourselves in entertainment. If our forefathers were willing to lay down their lives rather to uphold the crown rights of Jesus Christ over his church, who alone as the prerogative to dictate its doctrine, worship and government, how dare we be indifferent to these things. Why should we care about the doctrine, worship, and government of the Church? Because Christ is King! He alone as the right to determine these things. Any invention of man which is introduced to the Worship of God is a violation of the crown rights of Jesus and cannot be tolerated by any Christians who love their King.

As we study history as Christians, it is important that we remember to view history as God's providence, God's execution of the decrees of his eternal counsel. Academic historians, in their quest to maintain objectivity, will not acknowledge history as the work of God. But we must remain Christians even as we view history. For example, if you look at historical accounts of the destruction of Pompeii, that wicked and debauched city of perversion, like a second Sodom, which was destroyed by a volcano such that people were even petrified in their unclean acts, historians view it merely as a remarkable coincidence resulting from a natural disaster. However, we as Christians should be able to easily see that that was no mere coincidence, but the very judgment of God wiping out a wicked city whose sin was odious in his sight. Or, more relevant for us, when we see in history that Queen Mary Tudor, that wicked woman, along with Archbishop Pole of Canterbury, who were violent persecutors of Protestants, and seeking to undo the Reformation, and bring the Church of England back under the tyranny of popery—when we see in history that these two both died of disease on the same night, November 17, 1558, we mustn't be like the historians who view this as nothing more than a remarkable coincidence. No, we must see it as the Hand of God removing his enemies and giving relief to his saints.

The Confession as Gold, Silver, and Precious Stone (1Cor. 3.9-15)

§2. The Intellectual Context of the WCF

Faith Seeking Understanding

The Westminster Confession of Faith was written, I would argue, at the apex of theological development. Richard Muller divides the phases of Protestant Orthodoxy into three era: Early, High, and Late Orthodoxy. The Westminster Confession was written during the period of High Orthodoxy, which spanned from roughly 1640 to 1725.

This period of High Orthodoxy, when confessional reformed theology was maintained in its purest form, was brought about through generations of faith seeking understanding. Anselm of Canterbury's famous motto is "faith seeking understanding." Meaning that the enterprise of theology is to gain understanding in the heavenly doctrine we receive by faith in divine revelation and, when necessary, to give a defense of the faith. In the Early Church, that meant receiving the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, of his two natures and his person, and of the holy Trinity by faith, and seeking understanding in how to defend these holy doctrines from the onslaught of heresies that assaulted them. Through faith seeking understanding and giving a defense of the truth, these doctrines were developed and elaborated on as to answer difficult questions and refute objections, refined, and codified in the creeds of the early church. This continued into the Medieval Church, and into the Reformation as well.

§3. The Socio-Political Context of the WCF