

**The
Westminster
Standards**

in Modern English

edited by

Kevin J. Bidwell

When I was being trained for the ministry I was required to render a portion of the Westminster Standards into modern English. As a test of comprehension and communication the assignment was much harder than first appeared. This volume is the product of similar pains, and those who find the Standards more intelligible as a result have a debt of thanks to pay! That debt will double as readers discover the second part of the book: scholarly reflections urging the best of puritan piety for the good of the church today. Easy-to-read texts and need-to-read essays: seize the opportunity to deepen your faith!

Rev. Dr Chad Van Dixhoorn

An updated edition of a classic standard might be a daunting task. While we hesitate to dub the fine college of authors of this volume ‘The Westminster Divines 2.0,’ we can heartily endorse this work and commend it to churches and leaders. Indeed, it is faithful to the original, both a compliment to the original authors, faithfulness and to these latter disciples, separated by many generations and miles but virtually indistinguishable in substance and heartbeat. For this we are profoundly grateful. Both the essays and the editorial work are fine contributions to the church.

**David W. Hall, Sr. Pastor Midway Presbyterian Church
and author of *Windows on Westminster***

If anyone doubts the ongoing significance of the 17th-century Westminster Standards, let them dip into this outstanding work that brings this classic document into words that suit the 21st-century. The introductory articles are in themselves worth the price of the book. While relativism and contemporary queries confuse reality, the solid truths of God’s infallible Word as clearly formulated in the works of the Westminster divines continue to stand the test of time.

O. Palmer Robertson

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Preface

Benjamin Warfield recounted the story of an army officer stationed in an American city during a time of violent riots. The officer observed a man passing through these chaotic scenes with unusual calmness and confidence. As the soldier watched the man, he was surprised to see the man approach him and abruptly query, ‘What is the chief end of man?’ When the officer said, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever,’ the man replied, ‘I knew you were a Shorter Catechism boy!’ To this came the answer, ‘That’s just what I was thinking of you.’

For the last three and a half centuries, the Westminster Standards have trained generations of men and women to live with courageous peace, holy intention, and confident hope. These precious documents trace the pathway of faith and obedience that God reveals in his Word. Like a building with a thousand windows, the confession and catechisms produced by the Westminster divines radiate the clear light of Christ in every direction, inviting the reader to come and worship the Lord.

The English Parliament convened the Westminster Assembly in 1643 in the midst of great political, theological, and ecclesiastical tensions exacerbated by the reign of Charles I. Originally called to revise the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, the divines meeting at Westminster Abbey soon found themselves crafting doctrinal and ethical standards to unify the English Church and Scottish Kirk under the banner of biblical, Reformed Christianity. The Westminster Assembly had a rich heritage from which to draw, including the writings

of theologians such as John Calvin, William Perkins, and James Ussher. Though both Episcopalians and Congregationalists were represented at the assembly, Presbyterians dominated its proceedings and the vision of church life that it presented in its final documents.

One of the ironies of history is that the rise of Oliver Cromwell as a military commander and eventually Lord Protector meant that the English government never officially implemented the Reformed Presbyterian system of the Westminster Standards. However, the confession, catechisms, and directories were taken up by the Scottish Kirk in earnest. Despite the brutal persecution imposed on Scottish Covenanters during the late seventeenth-century, the Westminster Standards have continued to be a vital force in Reformed and Presbyterian Christianity around the world to this day.

The queen of Westminster documents is the Westminster Confession of Faith. Completed and submitted to Parliament in December 1646, *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines ... Concerning a Confession of Faith* would have Scripture proof-texts added a few months later (at the insistence of Parliament) to become the confession as we know it today. Its thirty-three chapters open up the doctrines of divine revelation, God, his decree, creation, providence, man's fall into sin and misery, the covenant of grace, Christ's saving work, the application of salvation, life of the church, and last things. It was much in demand, and by the end of the seventeenth century it had been printed in forty editions.

The theology of the confession has illuminated the minds of many people through the catechisms that accompanied it. Efforts to produce a catechism in 1645 and 1646 led the divines to realize they needed two catechisms: one simpler for children and one fuller in exposition. The Larger Catechism was substantially completed by October 1647 (with Scripture proofs in July 1648). Its 196 questions and answers provide rich instruction for teachers and preachers of God's word. Especially noteworthy are its detailed analyses of the Ten Commandments:

an entire ethical system in catechetical form. After the body of the Larger Catechism was written, the divines produced a smaller version by November 1647 (with Scripture proofs in April 1648). The Shorter Catechism presents an excellent condensation of Reformed confessional truths in 107 questions and answers for memorization and study by youth. It opens with the grand statement that introduced the army officer to his new friend, that the main purpose of human life is ‘to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.’

The God-centered Christianity summarized in the Westminster Standards energizes the worship, holiness, and missions of Reformed Christians to this day. Therefore, it is a delight to see this volume come to print. May God use the modernized English edition of the Westminster Standards to help new generations to embrace their heritage of Reformation truth derived from God’s holy word.

Joel R. Beeke

Introduction

The *Westminster Standards* are one of the finest summaries of the Christian faith penned by the church in her long history. Drawn up by the Westminster Assembly (1643–1653) they traditionally comprise the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, along with the 196 questions of the *Larger Catechism* and the 107 questions of the *Shorter Catechism*, and also *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* and *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government* and *The Directory for Family Worship*. In this book we will use the term *Westminster Standards* to mean the *Confession* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, which were approved by the Church of Scotland in 1648.

To many Christians this will seem to be something of historical interest only. Why is it that these doctrinal standards are so little known and used by the greater part of the church today? There are many possible answers to this question. A neglect of church history and consequent ignorance of how and why the magisterial Confessions arose is doubtless a factor. There is a contemporary lack of interest in doctrine in many parts of the church, especially where it might hinder attempts at unity. Perhaps most significantly, faced with a culture that is increasingly opposed to the idea of objective truth, some feel that the clear statements of the *Standards* are simply too provocative.

This book has been borne out of a love for the church and the honour of the Triune God through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is as a pastor, a minister of the gospel, that I write this introduction. On one occasion a university student who worshipped with us

explained that she came to a saving knowledge of Christ during our catechism class. This weekly class before our morning Lord's Day service expounds the *Westminster Standards* in order to provide an explanation of what the church believes and why. This student had been brought up in a Christian home, but it was in the catechism class that she saw how the elements of biblical truth could be brought together harmoniously. Her mind was informed and her heart moved so that she was given an assurance of salvation. That got my attention!

Practically, in our local setting in Sheffield, England, we seek to disseminate these peerless statements of the Christian faith, but an immediate problem became apparent to us. The original documents, which were first produced by the Westminster Assembly in London and published in the 1640s, were available to us only in eighteenth-century English (the most common printed form of the *Standards* is the 1728 edition). As far as we were able to determine, the *Confession* and the two *Catechisms* intact, without revisions, amendments or added proof texts in modern English could not be readily found. We set out to change this, initially for our own congregational use.

What was our aim? It was simply to preserve the original integrity of these documents and their proof-texts through light editorial changes to remove the seventeenth and eighteenth-century English and to insert the common English used today. It was perhaps a naive venture because it proved to be more demanding and extensive in scope than we imagined at first, but it has been achieved. No doctrinal changes have been introduced. The numbers of people involved in proofreading, editing, formatting and encouragement in this project are more than it is possible to list. You know who you are; thank you.

Certain alterations were uncomplicated in the change from the original text to modern English. For example, where *Holy Ghost* was used it has been uniformly altered to *Holy Spirit*. Original words have been preserved where possible and occasional wording in square brackets is included for the sake of clarity. Nevertheless, some words needed to be changed. Most

people would not know these words which are found in the original of the *Westminster Standards*: vouchsafes; supererogate; contemn; oblation; keeping of stewes (they mean: promises; go beyond duty; disdain; offering; keeping of brothels). Our purpose in updating the language was to enhance the overall comprehension and usability of the *Standards*.

It is a personal joy for me that this project has grown. The completed *Westminster Standards* are included in this book because we want Christians to read them and church ministers and elders to teach from them. We have included a small selection of the most prominent creeds as well, with the hope that Christians will become more familiar with them (the *Apostles'*, *Nicene* and *Athanasian* creeds are included, along with the *Creed of Chalcedon*). As the project developed, the suggestion was made that we should seek to get this published for a wider audience and also include a number of essays. Our hope is that the essays will further enrich our readers and whet their appetite for the truths contained in the *Standards* themselves.

The essays have been written by a range of authors with this in common: all are ordained ministers, who labour on the frontline in pastoral and teaching ministry (the one exception is the essay on the Christian Sabbath by the Puritan George Swinnock). Working with these men in the editing and proofreading process has been an honour. It is our intention to equip readers with the historical background to the theology and practice that lay behind the *Confession* and *Catechisms*, in order to fuel further reformation of the church in our day. We have sought to include the primary emphases that underlie the *Standards*. The seven essay titles are:

Extraordinary Providences of an Enduring Standard (Richard D. Phillips, Senior minister of Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC (part of the Presbyterian Church in America)).

The Westminster Standards in the Making: Stanley Gower, A Westminster Divine (Kevin J. Bidwell, minister of Sheffield Presbyterian Church (part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales)).

The Westminster Standards and Public Worship (David E. Gilbert, minister of Grace Presbyterian Church, Douglasville, GA (part of the Presbyterian Church in America)).

The Westminster Standards and the Christian Sabbath (George Swinnock (1627–1673), English Nonconformist minister).

The Westminster Standards and the Sacraments (Andy J. Young, church planting minister of Oxford Evangelical Presbyterian Church, part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales).

The Westminster Standards and Family Worship (Chad T. Bailey, assistant minister at Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC).

The Westminster Standards and Church Government (Guy Prentiss Waters, associate professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, MS).

The combination of both British and American ministers writing together signals a joint desire for the recovery of truth in the wider church on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Each of these ministers labours in a Presbyterian church, but we do not consider the *Westminster Standards* to be exclusively Presbyterian.

We recognize that copies of the *Westminster Standards* in modern English are readily available in the USA and in use by Presbyterian denominations. The preface to the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms with Proof Texts* as adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America helpfully explains significant changes that have been made, in contrast to the original documents.¹ The Orthodox Presbyterian Church has laboured for decades to study and revise the proof texts. We do not intend to detract from this sterling work that has sought to serve the church in the USA and elsewhere. We believe provision of the original text of the *Westminster Standards* in modern

¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms with Proof Texts*, as adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America, Preface, Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education & Publications, 2007, pp vii–xii. It can also be accessed at <http://www.pcaac.org/resources/wcf/>

English, along with its unaltered proof texts, is hopefully a welcome resource for all parts of the Christian church. Our hope is that our readers will join with us in prayer for the recovery of biblically-anchored public worship and the use of these catechisms in public instruction and in family worship.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* was specifically designed for public teaching by ministers and its doctrine envelops the doctrine of the church. We do well to remember the famed comment by Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661) as to the necessity for two catechisms instead of one; he contended at the Westminster Assembly for two, because he believed that it had been very difficult ‘to dress up milk and meat both in one dish.’ In other words the church needs to know, use and teach both catechisms for its spiritual vitality.

I conclude with the words of a favourite theologian, Professor John Murray (1898–1975). He wrote in an essay on ‘The Importance and Relevance of the *Westminster Confession*’ that: ‘No creed of the Christian Church is comparable to that of Westminster in respect of skill with which fifteen centuries of Christian thought have been preserved, and at the same time examined anew and clarified in the light of that fuller understanding of God’s Word which the Holy Spirit has imparted ... in the category to which the Confession belongs, it has no peer.’¹

Our desire is that future generations will continue to enjoy the fruit of the labours of the Westminster Assembly, especially that preserved through the *Westminster Standards*. Such hope for the furtherance of Bible doctrine is anticipated in Psalm 22:30–31: *Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.*

Kevin J. Bidwell
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¹ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Volume One *Claims of Truth*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976, reprinted 2001, 317–318.

Preface to *The Westminster Standards in Modern English*

There is something about structure that makes learning—and memorization in particular—more manageable. Years ago, as I approached the first year of law school, someone mentioned to me that an effective way to handle the complex subjects ahead was to memorize the table of contents in each of the textbooks. The idea was that, week-by-week, as information came from the lectures, the material would neatly fit into the structure outlined in each text. It was a version of thinking along with the authors and the professors, and it proved to be a helpful tool in making it through school.

And now, many years of law practice since, the procedure continues to be useful. As new principles come along, either from statutory law or case decisions, there is almost always a place to put those rules or rulings in the structure of my thinking about a subject. New concepts drop into the memorized outline at logical places.

Interestingly, the *Westminster Standards* has been a similar resource in my own life, providing a reformed framework that has proven invaluable for my personal time in the Word, in Bible teaching, and in my role as a Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church in America. The structure adopted by the Westminster Assembly, from beginning to end, is logical and understandable, making it equally valuable to both laymen and ordained clergy. Little wonder that the *Confession* has traveled through nearly 400 years of history with usefulness, clarity, and relevance.

Among the many reasons this is the case, one is the wisdom of its authors in the outline of the theological system it declares.

Of course, the reformed and orthodox tradition is grounded in Word and Spirit, with Christ as its cornerstone. We proclaim Christ and his benefits, not the *Confession* and its structure. But still, as it concerns the Christian faith, the *Confession* is particularly useful in organizing and presenting the truths of the Word. In that sense, it is akin to the table of contents in a textbook.

As an illustration, a thirty-something young man and I were recently interacting about a near-crippling burden of anger he had carried for many years. He believed that it began with the divorce of his parents, and his anger had simmered and grown inwardly through his school years and early adulthood. In his early 30s the anger spilled over into essentially every aspect of his life: marriage, children, co-workers, friends, even with complete strangers. He said he believed in God, but he quickly added that his recent church experience was having no impact on how he thought or felt. If God were real and in his life, he was angry about the way things turned out.

What this young man appeared to need was a clear way of thinking about the sovereign hand of God as it had worked out in his life. So in simple words we began to work through what the Bible says about God, His decrees, providence, sin, and Christ as the Mediator. In understandable terms we discussed atonement, imputed righteousness, propitiation, and expiation. We talked about sanctification, perseverance, and assurance.

Our conversation took place at the end of a conference table as we sat 90 degrees to one another. When he first began to relate his story, he rarely made eye contact, staring away from where I sat just a few feet away. As we walked through these great principles of faith—which was generally tracking relevant portions of the table of contents of the *Confession*—his gaze shifted. He began to pay attention to the paper where I was diagramming aspects of the substitution of Christ's obedience

for our failed efforts to obey, and finally he began to make eye contact in earnest.

My heart sang as this young friend laid his burden down. It brought to mind the burden-releasing experience of Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Remember the account:

Now I saw in my dream that the highway up which Christian was to go was fenced on either side with a wall; and that wall was called 'Salvation.'

In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks Isaiah 26:1.

Up this way, therefore, did burdened Christian run; but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back.

He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up to the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble; and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.

Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said, with a merry heart,

'He hath given me rest by his sorrow, And life by his death.'

Then he stood still awhile to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him, that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden. He looked therefore, and looked again, even till the springs that were in his head sent the waters down his cheeks.

In a timeless way Bunyan's seventeenth-century allegory communicates with powerful, though to some degree, dated diction. My early-30s friend may at some point take up *The Pilgrim's Progress*, make his way through it, see its message, and find inspiration in it, but at the time of our conversation

what he needed was a clear twenty-first-century word about the framework of faith in plain English. That reality has given me great enthusiasm for *The Westminster Standards in Modern English*.

The organizational system of the *Confession* is both timeless and helpful, and now this amplified text will make its usage doubly beneficial for believers who want for themselves, and for others with whom they interact, a clear word concerning the Christian message.

Joseph H. Fowler

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May 31, 2016

Extraordinary Providences of an Enduring Standard

Rev. Dr Richard D. Phillips

In a sharp irony from church history, one of the decisive events of the English Civil War occurred eight years before the first ringing of cold steel. In the 1630s, many Puritans were fleeing to escape the religious tyranny of Archbishop William Laud, England's chief prelate under King Charles I. Venting his considerable spite towards the Puritans, Laud in 1634 seized a convoy of ships headed for New England and prohibited the dispirited passengers from leaving. For this reason, the man who would later oversee Laud's execution was barred from exiting the country. By Laud's capricious malice, young Oliver Cromwell was forced off his ship back onto English soil, later to lead Parliament's army in victory over the royalists and to direct the condemnation not only of Laud but also of Charles I.¹

This incident involving the Puritans' future battle captain is just one of many extraordinary providences that were instrumental in shaping the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*. Every doctrinal standard is of course a product of its times, and often the influence of local events will determine its value to the church. When it comes to the *Westminster Standards*, the remarkable setting of the English Civil War and

¹ Cited from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Volume 1, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983, 714.

the seventeenth century as a whole served to give it an enduring quality the like of which is not likely to be repeated. To recount the sovereign hand of God over the *Westminster Standards* is important today, when some members of Presbyterian and Reformed churches would doubt how well a 370 year-old document could serve as our doctrinal yardstick. Occasionally, we hear calls for a new confession or the admission of more modern statements of faith to come alongside the *Westminster Confession*. However, if we will travel back to the years after Cromwell was kept in England, years of civil and spiritual conflict that sharpened both the Puritan sword and spirit, we may remember what a singular set of circumstances has given us the most excellent of all Reformed confessions, the value of which will endure until Christ comes again.

In celebrating the powerful circumstances by which God provided the *Westminster Standards*, we must take care to place such providences on a categorically lower plane than those involved in the inspiration and preservation of Holy Scripture. In both its inspiration and its revelation, the Bible involves a naked supernaturalism that sets it uniquely above every other authority. When it comes to the *Westminster Standards*, the working of God is cloaked by natural historical events which combined to provide a remarkably valuable resource to his church. According to Benjamin B. Warfield, the *Westminster Confession* stands at the high-water mark of a long process of doctrinal conflict which had the effect of clarifying and perfecting the church's grasp of biblical teaching. Especially in the Reformation age that preceded Westminster, 'the gem of the gospel was cut and polished, and it is on this account that the enunciation of the gospel in the Reformed Confessions attains its highest purity.'¹ As the culminating expression of the Reformation's dogmatic achievement, 'the *Westminster*

1 Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed John E. Meeter, Volume 2, Phillipsburg: P&R, 1973, 661.

Confession, the product of the Puritan conflict, reaches a perfection of statement never elsewhere achieved.¹

The aim of this chapter is to highlight four extraordinary providences involved in the production of the *Westminster Standards* that contribute to their enduring relevance and these should inspire us to grateful appreciation for their unsurpassed expression of biblical doctrine.

An Extraordinary Partnership of Church and State

The Westminster Assembly would never have met except for the long-developing alliance between the English Parliament and the Puritan divines during the tumultuous first half of the seventeenth century. This alliance was forged in the resolve of the Stuart dynasty to assert an absolute monarchy on the nation. James I and his son Charles I sought to summon and dissolve Parliaments at their whim, thus disenfranchising the representative element of national government. At the same time, they sought control over Britain's churches via the Archbishop of Canterbury and his appointed prelates. As early as 1604, in the Hampton Court Conference, newly crowned James I rebuffed the requests of Puritans for moderate church reform and debuted his signature motto: 'No bishop, no king.' From that moment, there could be no doubt that royal autocracy and episcopal tyranny would march hand-in-hand. The result was a partnership between Parliament and Puritans that was heartfelt and determined. In 1640, when the so-called Long Parliament refused to be dissolved by the over-reaching Charles I, these champions of representative government pitted themselves not only against the king's throne but also the bishop's chair.

This brief summary of many dramatic events had the momentous result of Parliament summoning in 1643 an assembly of divines to establish a new foundation for a national church. Determined to rid the nation of haughty bishops, they also feared the suspected Roman Catholicism of the king and his court and

1 Ibid.