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## Misusing the Westminster Confession

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Of late considerable controversy has arisen over Biblical Theology in conservative Presbyterian circles. Generally speaking, those opposing “new” ideas – which are actually not new, and which are fully Calvinistic – do so by pitting them against the Westminster Confession of Faith and its accompanying Catechisms, together called the Westminster Standards. By doing this, such opponents very often abuse the Standards, assuming things that are false about the Standards and the intention of their writers.

First, the Standards are often a consensus document. The men at the Westminster Assembly did not all agree with each other about everything. There was a variety of views on things like what happens at baptism, for instance, and the imputation to the elect of the “active obedience” of Jesus, for another. Often the Standards reflect an attempt to form a consensus, or to do justice to the concerns of all parties. Hence, it is often quite wrong to use the Standards to argue for only one very particular understanding of, say, baptism or imputation, and to insist that anyone disagreeing with that view is out of step with the Standards.

Second, and along the same lines, the Westminster Confession was designed as the constitution of a national church, not as a list of denominational distinctives. Denominations did not exist, or were only beginning to exist, at this time. The writers wanted to produce a document that all generally Protestant pastors in England could agree with, not a document that forced them all into the same mold. The Standards were not created to be a filter by which to defrock every English minister who could not swear to every jot and tittle they

contained.

Third, the writers were not under the illusion that their document could substitute for the decisions of the living Church. The Standards teach “limited atonement” or “particular redemption,” but the writers knew that not all Reformed and Protestant pastors in England had the same understanding of what this doctrine meant. They did not intend to exclude such men. The Standards would be used as a guideline, and an important and necessary guideline, but would not substitute for the decisions of individual presbyteries of dioceses in the national church. Certainly the Confession was designed to exclude Romanists, Arminians, Amyraldians, and Arians (proto-liberals), but if a presbytery were convinced that a man was a sound pastor, fit for ministry, they would not be bound to insist that he subscribe to every jot and tittle of the Confession, only that he agree to live under it.

Fourth, it is important to realize that to a large extent the Standards were intended for pastors, for ordained clergymen. The writers knew that what laymen need is the Bible, the whole Bible. The Confession sets up standards for the guardians of the Church. But there are churches today that are full of people who know the five points of Calvinism, but who cannot tell you the five basic “sacrifices” of the Bible, because these laymen have been indoctrinated primarily in the Westminster Standards rather than in the Bible. That was not the intention of the writers, though of course they expected pastors to teach the content and theology of the Standards along with teaching the Bible. Along these lines it is important to realize that the assembly actually voted down a proposal that the

Catechism be subscribed to. [John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1973), p. 105.]

Fifth, we hear today that there is a "system of doctrine" in the Standards, a system that reflects adequately (sometimes even said to reflect almost perfectly) what the Bible says. Well, of course there is a "system" in the Standards, but the question is how detailed that system is. To say that there is a general system though many details in the Standards are not necessarily bound into that system, is quite different from saying that the Standards form a system that is tightly locked down in every detail.

For instance, we hear today that the "covenant of works" notion is an integral part of the Westminster Standards' theology, and that departing from it is a departure from the Standards. Not so. The Westminster documents also use the phrase "covenant of life." The "system" is that there are two stages of human life, a first stage with Adam and a second stage with the New Adam. While the Standards set forth a general "covenant of works" notion, a fully-developed notion of a "covenant of *meritorious* works" as advocated loudly today in some quarters, is not integral to the Westminster system. Nor is it found there: The Standards speak only of perfect and perpetual faithful obedience, not of "earning merits." It is one thing to argue that Adam was supposed to progress to some higher phase of life; it is another to insist on some particular notion of how he was to do so.

Imagine a man coming for ordination who said, "It seems to me that it is not so much life as such that God promised Adam, but glory, glorified life. Adam, had he continued in faithful obedience, would have been given a glorified life. Hence, I would prefer to speak of a 'first covenant' and avoid the phrases 'covenant of works' and 'covenant of life.'" The notion that a man who preferred such phrasing would be defrocked from the Church of England after the adoption of the Westminster Standards, or would be denied ordination, is not credible.

Sixth, along these same lines, did the writers think or imagine that what the Standards present is the *only* systematic way of presenting what is in the Bible? I think not. They knew better than that. God is One and Three, and His Word can be "systematized" in more than only one way.

Seventh, the assembly took place at a particular time in history, almost 400 years ago. The Stan-

dards reflect very much the style of theologizing, and the concerns of the Church, at that time. [On the "modified scholasticism" style of theology, see John Leith's book, noted above.] As someone pledged to the Standards by my ordination, I am happy to affirm the value and truthfulness of the Standards' statements about the controversies of its time, controversies about predestination, for instance. And I am happy to affirm that these are profound and abiding issues. But the notion that after 400 years we are in the same world, and face the same exact issues, is ridiculous on the face of it.

Eighth, following on this point, the writers of the Standards hardly expected their work to be used as definitive for the next four centuries. They themselves had lived through the writing of earlier Confessions and Catechisms, like the Canons of the Synod of Dort only three decades earlier. They would have expected something new to be written by the next generation. They would be appalled if they could come back today and see that people are still using their Standards, and that nothing else had been done for 400 years! These men were not seeking to say that last word in the history of the Church! (It should be noted, however, that some of the smaller Scottish churches did indeed add supplementary "testimonies" to the Standards from time to time.)

Along these lines, the continual use of the Standards over a long period of time has not infrequently had a bad effect. The writers of the Standards were men of breadth and depth, who were primarily interested in the Bible, the whole Bible, and what God says in and through the Bible to humanity. Continual focus on the Standards, however, often leads over the course of time to a narrower and shallower religion. It can lead to sectarianism and even to a kind of functional idolatry in which the Standards become practically more important than the Bible. Preachers and teachers can go round and round inside the Standards, assuming that all that is really important is found there, and virtually ignoring everything else the Bible has to say. The issues that were primarily in focus in the 1640s are assumed to be the major issues in the Bible itself. (After all, while the doctrines of predestination occupy the Standards to a considerable extent, how often does the Bible touch on this matter in any kind of direct way?) Over time, the limited concerns of the Standards are pressed into every part of the Bible,

while the actual teaching of many parts of the Bible goes unnoticed.

Ninth, it is very important to realize that the writers of the Standards were theologians and that they knew how theology is done. It is not done by prooftexting, but by reasoning from the Bible as a whole, about certain issues. Often theology is done by reasoning “up” from what the Bible says, while keeping in mind as a boundary what cannot be true. These are sometimes called the “way of eminence and analogy” and the “way of negation.” There is, for instance, no prooftext that says that the Son is “eternally begotten” by the Father. Theologians reason “up” to this from what the Bible says about how the Father and Son relate in history.

Similarly, it is arguable at least that Ephesians 1 speaks not of election and predestination unto the *end* of life, unto everlasting life with God, but speaks rather of God’s electing people into a new *beginning*, into His Church and making promises to them, even though some may fall away. But theologians can reason from this “upward” to the idea that God also elects some people to persevere in faithfulness to the end. And because of the controversies of their times, the writers of the Standards devoted their attention to this second aspect of the notion of Divine election.

Now, the writers did *not* attach “prooftexts” to the original Standards that they wrote, and when asked to provide them by the English Parliament, did not want to do so. The writers knew that they were writing theology, not providing a guide for reading the Bible. They were required to add “prooftexts” by Parliament, but we must understand that many of these are not actual proof texts but foundations from which a given statement in the Standards is derived.

Yet today, many use the Standards as a guide for reading the Bible, and that was not its intention. They look at the prooftexts and say, “This is what the writers are saying that this verse means in its context.” But the writers may have only meant, “This verse supplies support for the conclusion we have put down in the Standards.”

The Standards are an *application* of the *whole* Bible to certain central and important issues. They are not, and were not intended to be, a statement of how particular verses and passages must be read, understood, and preached. To use them that way is to abuse them.

Tenth, and finally, the Standards are abused

when men affirm only those sections of them that support their prejudices, and ignore the parts that do not. The Standards are actually quite broad and catholic, but they are sometimes not treated as such.

### Sectarian Quackery

The abuse of the Standards today comes primarily from a minority of sectarian Presbyterians, men who reject the twin doctrines of catholicity and Christendom. A lack of Biblical catholicity has been a sad characteristic of virtually every strain of Christian faith for centuries, as people from other flavors of Christian faith are denied the Lord’s Supper because they do not agree with the doctrinal distinctives of a particular group. One finds this in Anglican, Lutheran, Continental Reformed, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches. Many conservatives in all of these groups are more catholic in their treatment of other Christians today, but there are also sectarian backwaters in all these groups.

Sectarian Presbyterians abuse the Westminster Standards, often adding more particular teachings to what they actually say, as a way to read out of the faith other flavors of Christians. A couple of conferences held recently at the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church of Monroe, Louisiana, can serve as one example. At these conferences was presented and advocated a form of Continental Reformed theology. The reaction among sectarian Presbyterians has been intense. Expressions of deep concern have been heard. The word “heresy” has been used by more than a few critics. And this language has been used against Calvinists who simply advocate different approaches to the same basic doctrines and teachings, approaches that are of long-standing in other Calvinistic theological traditions!

And I should add that many of the “controversial” teachings advocated at these recent Auburn Avenue PC conferences can be found right in the Westminster Standards themselves, but in parts or aspects of the Standards ignored by the critics. These teachings can be found in Presbyterian theologians of various stripes and denominations of the past four centuries, but the critics either do not know this, or choose to ignore it.

A form of this same controversy arose around professor Norman Shepherd at Westminster Theological Seminary in the late 1970s, when I

was a student there. Shepherd was attacked by sectarian Presbyterians for teaching Continental Reformed theology, a point made by a professor at the Canadian Reformed Theological College who wrote that what Shepherd was teaching was what they also believe and teach, and that to treat Shepherd as a heretic was to treat the Continental Reformed traditions as heretical. Dr. Cornelius Van Til and other more catholic teachers at Westminster made the same point. Shepherd himself could point to older Scottish Presbyterians who taught the same things he was teaching. Eventually, however, Shepherd was forced out of his teaching position, and departed Presbyterianism for a ministry in the Christian Reformed Church, where he became a leading advocate for conservative Biblical teaching.

Both of these utterly bizarre incidents arose because there exist in conservative presbyterianism men whose thinking is so governed by shibboleths (code words) that they are seemingly incapable, or at least wholly unwilling, to listen to what anyone else says long enough to understand what that other person means by the words he uses. If a man departs from the precise language and formulations of the Westminster Standards, *as they understand them*, he is counted as a heretic!

The same treatment is being accorded these days to the writings of Calvinistic Anglican N. T. Wright. Anyone who has read much of Wright knows that he strongly affirms the teachings of the Reformation, and regards himself as standing in line with John Calvin, though also in the Anglican tradition. Wright has done battle with liberals and with Anglo-Catholics. One does not have to agree with everything the prolific Wright has written to recognize that he is mostly on the same page as other Calvinistic evangelicals. But because Wright does not say everything precisely the way these sectarians are used to hearing it, he is regarded with deep suspicion and even as an enemy of Biblical religion.

(I myself agree with Wright on some things, disagree with him on others. I find many things he's written amazingly insightful and helpful, and occasionally cringe at a few other things.)

The problem with sectarianism is not so much doctrine as attitude. Other kinds of Christians are not read charitably. Other kinds of Christians are not given the benefit of the doubt. Other kinds of Christians are not listened to long enough to hear what they are trying to get at. This is because

other kinds of Christians are viewed with suspicion and even hostility.

Sectarianism is not only anti-catholic, but also anti-Christendom. Jesus came to set up a kingdom, and in that kingdom the Church continues to be His priestly and prophetic voice. All of life is to submit to King Jesus. Two decades ago, the sectarians went to war against "theonomists" and "Christian Reconstructionists" for insisting that all Scripture (including the "Mosaic law") is profitable for instruction in all righteousness (including legal and political matters) (2 Timothy 3:16-17). To be sure, the theonomists often went further and claimed that the specific laws God gave to Israel as a civil society are in detail binding upon Christian nations today, not binding in a more general "wisdom" fashion as God's Word to be creatively applied in sometimes new ways. But for a long time the "Christian Reconstructionists" were the only people insisting that the *Bible* be taken seriously as King Jesus' word for *all* of life, and it was that more general teaching that made them scandalous in the eyes of sectarians.

For the sectarian the notion of Christendom, of national and international transformation, is itself an evil. For them, the Church is an elect community simply existing in this world and waiting for the next. Christian families and even Christian schools are acceptable, as isolated from the world, but "discipling the nations" is rejected. King Jesus is king only of the Church and individuals, not of nations.

This is certainly not the perspective of the Westminster Standards, which were written at the command of Parliament to be the constitution of a national church! But it has become the gut-level perspective of many sectarian Presbyterians today. Those who attack the concept of Christendom are far removed from the Standards they often so loudly advocate.

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