

The Westminster Standards

by John Murray

The Westminster Standards are the mature fruit of the whole movement of creed formation throughout Christian history, and the crown of the greatest age of confessional exposition, the Protestant Reformation.

Scripture: Matthew 5:1, Luke 14:27, John 13:35, Philippians 3:17, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 1 Timothy 4:12, 2 Timothy 2:2, Hebrews 13:7

Topics: "Discipleship", "Christian Living"

Description

Ralph Earle, Barclay, Mounce, TDNT, NIDNTT, Tony Evans, and various Bible scholars emphasize the importance of discipleship, which involves intentional learning, inquiry, and observation from Jesus. Discipleship requires a commitment to follow Jesus, learn His truth, and live a life of beauty and blessing. The term 'disciple' carries the connotation of being a learner, pupil, and follower of a teacher, with the goal of becoming like the teacher in character. Genuine discipleship involves total attachment to Jesus, obedience to His teachings, and a lifetime of work and service for Him.

Transcript

The Westminster Assembly was wholly British in its composition. It should not, however, be thought that these British divines of the seventeenth century pursued their task and framed the standards of which they were the authors in aloof indifference to the Reformed churches on the continent of Europe. The very task assigned to the Assembly by ordinance of the English Parliament was in terms of the resolution on the part of the Lords and Commons that a government should "be settled in the Church as may be most agreeable to God's holy word, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the Church at home, and nearer agreement with the Church of Scotland, and other Reformed Churches abroad." Dr. S. W. Carruthers in his recent book, *The Everyday Work of the Westminster Assembly*, informs us that as early as November 15, 1643, Alexander Henderson, one of the Scottish commissioners, reminded the divines that the "Continental churches were interestedly watching them, and that it was desirable that they should try to avoid giving offence or prejudice to them" (p. 36). Much evidence might be adduced to show the extent to which the divines at Westminster were acquainted with the best product of Reformed thought in churches outside the British Isles. It can be said in the words of B. B. Warfield that "it belonged to the historical situation of the Westminster Divines that their doctrinal work should take much the form of a consensus of the Reformed theology" (*The Westminster Assembly and its Work*, p. 159). The theology of the Westminster Standards then is the Reformed theology.

This rather obvious though necessary characterization of the theology of Westminster is no adequate assessment of the unsurpassed formulation of that theology embodied in these Standards, especially in the Confession and Catechisms. The Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was peculiarly prolific in the production of Confessions of Faith, as also of Catechisms. It was an age of ardent and polemic faith and the framing of creeds was the natural result. Nearly all of these creeds are notable and valuable exhibitions of Christian truth, and not a few of them are of priceless value. But the Westminster Confession and Catechisms are the last in the series of these great Reformation creeds. The rich repertory of Protestant confessional statement, covering more than a hundred years, was the heritage of the Westminster divines. It not only fell to their lot to compare, to sift and to evaluate in the light of more than a century of faithful and devoted labour on the part of others, but it was also their disposition and determination to do so.

Of even greater significance is the fact that no other Protestant or Reformed confession had brought to bear upon its composition such a combination of devotion, care, patience and erudition as was exhibited in the work of the Westminster Assembly. The Westminster Confession and Catechisms, therefore, are the mature fruit of the whole movement of creed formation throughout fifteen centuries of Christian history. In particular, they are the crown of the greatest age of confessional exposition, the Protestant Reformation. No other similar documents have concentrated in them, and formulated with such precision, so much of the truth deposited in the Christian revelation.

A necessary feature of any adequate creedal exhibition of the Christian Faith is coherent and systematic presentation. The attempt to set forth the truth systematically does not imply that the human mind can comprehend the whole counsel of God revealed in the Scriptures nor that all the truth revealed in Scripture can be brought within the compass of any creed framed by men. Such pretension has never been the presupposition of creed formation either Catholic, Protestant or Reformed. But the great Protestant creeds and especially the Reformed do rest upon the principle that the Scripture revelation is not a series of unrelated and disjointed disclosures of the divine mind and will but an organism characterized by unity and harmony, that the Scripture contains a corpus of truth revealed by God to man that does not alter its character with the changes of human history nor depend for its validity upon the votes of fluctuating human judgment. The divines sitting at Westminster regarded it as their business to elicit from the Scripture the system of truth set forth therein, and this is just saying that they regarded it as their task to exhibit in orderly, logical and systematic fashion the system of truth they found God had deposited in the holy Scripture.

It is of prime importance that a Reformed creed should guard liberty of interpretation on those questions that are ostensibly matters of dispute among the most orthodox of Reformed thinkers. It is of even greater importance that a Reformed creed should be consistently biblical. The faith God has given to His church cannot receive too accurate and consistent exhibition in the forms of confession and catechism so that they may serve as the symbols of wholehearted devotion to the Word of God, as the means of instruction and edification and its bulwarks against error. Both of these requirements have been admirably fulfilled by the Westminster standards. It is for these reasons that they have performed such signal service in the history of the Reformed church as the instruments of unity and the guardians of orthodoxy. To discard the heritage of the past is the mark of both ignorance and conceit. The way of humility before God and of gratitude to Him is to recognize that other men laboured and we have entered into their labours.

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