

Colleyville Presbyterian Church
Westminster Confession of Faith: Week 1 - Historical Context
November 27, 2022

Major Confessions of the Reformation:

- 1560 - Scots Confession (John Knox, English, Scotland)
- 1561 - Belgic Confession (Guido de Brès, French, Netherlands)
- 1562 - Second Helvetic Confession (Heinrich Bullinger, Latin, Switzerland)
- 1563 - Heidelberg Catechism (Zacharius Ursinus, German, Netherlands)
- 1571 - Thirty-Nine Articles (English, England)
- 1619 - Canons of Dordt (Latin, Netherlands)
- 1647 - Westminster Confession of Faith (English, England/Scotland)
- 1643-1653 - Westminster Assembly

Greg Salazar: “On June 12, 1643, Parliament released a summoning ordinance to gather together ‘an Assemblie of Learned and Godlie divines . . . for the Settling of the Government and the Litturgie of the Church of England.’ The total number of invited participants was 120, although the average attendance of most sessions was between seventy and eighty divines, as the members are called. The assembly eventually convened on July 1, 1643, to redefine and refine orthodoxy in England after a tumultuous decade of Laudian reform. This body was the intellectual engine behind Parliament and the Puritan revolution and became one of the most formidable institutions in Britain during this time.

The assembly met extensively over a decade of turmoil—1,330 times from 1643 to 1652—and then appeared to meet for another year, likely on a weekly basis. The divines gathered Monday through Friday, beginning their days at 6 a.m. with a lecture and prayer, followed by a sermon from a probationary minister, and then held committee meetings. The plenary sessions began at nine a.m. and consisted of debating the day’s proposition until lunch (usually breaking between noon and two p.m.). After lunch were further committee meetings until around five p.m. or later. While the divines’ initial aim was to reform the Thirty-Nine Articles, eventually they pursued a full-scale reformation of English worship, doctrine, and church government.

There were many practical matters involved in the divines’ attendance at the assembly, including many divines’ relocating their families to London to participate. This explains why only half of those invited were present at the opening ceremony. Members were paid four shillings per day for their labors, though in the end, members only received half of the final remuneration that was due to them. Understanding the context allows us to appreciate the literal blood, sweat, and tears that went into crafting these principal documents. This reveals that far from being armchair theologians, these men understood that the matters they were considering were truly matters of life and death. They pursued their ministry in the midst of a gruesome civil war that divided the country and resulted in the execution of the king. As a result of these labors, they produced not only the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms but also the Directory of Worship, a psalter, and other shorter papers. They also examined more than two thousand preachers and some heretics.”

John Murray: “The Westminster Assembly did not abstract itself from the history of the church but willingly and gratefully recognized itself as the debtor to all the wisdom and light that God in his providence had caused to be deposited in the expositions and formulation of the past.

More particularly, the Westminster divines were the heirs of all the other evangelical creeds of the Reformation period. The Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was peculiarly prolific in the production of confessions of faith. It was an age of ardent and polemic faith and the framing of creeds or confessions was the natural result... It is noteworthy, however, that the Westminster Confession and Catechisms are the last in the series of the great Reformation creeds. This fact of chronology is itself of great significance. The rich repertory of Protestant confessional statements covering more than a hundred years lay open before them. It was their happy lot to compare, to sift, to select and to evaluate in the full light of more than a century of faithful and devoted labor on the part of others. But perhaps 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 and erudition as was exhibited in the work of the Westminster Assembly... The Westminster Confession and Catechisms are, therefore, the mature fruit of the whole development of creed-formation throughout fifteen centuries of Christian history, and in particular, they are the crown of the greatest age of confession exposition, the Protestant Reformation. No other similar documents have concentrated in them, and formulated with such precision, so much of the truth embodied in the Christian revelation.”

Robert Baillie, 1643: “On Monday morning we sent to both Houses of Parliament for a warrant for our sitting in the Assemblie... When we were brought in, Dr. Twisse had a long harangue for our welcome, after so long and hazardous a voyage by sea and land, in so unseasonable a tyme of the year. When he had ended, we satt down in these places which since we have kept. The like of that Assemblie I did never see, and, as we hear say, the like was never in England, nor any where is shortlie lyke to be... We meet every day of the week, but Saturday. We sitt commonlie from nine to one or two afternoon... Ordinarlie there will be present above three-score of their divines. These are divided in three Committees; in one whereof every man is a member. No man is excluded who pleases to come to any of the three. Every Committee, as the Parliament gives order in wryte to take any purpose to consideration, takes a portion, and in their afternoon meeting prepares matters for the Assemblie, setts doune their minde in distinct propositions, backs their propositions with texts of Scripture.

After the prayer, Mr. Byfield the scribe, reads the proposition and Scriptures, whereupon the Assemblie debates in a most grave and orderlie way. No man is called up to speak; bot who stands up of his own accord, he speaks so long as he will without interruption. If two or three stand up at once, then the divines confusedlie calls on his name whom they desyre to hear first: On whom the loudest and manifest voices calls, he speakes. No man speaks to any bot to the Proloqutor. They harangue long and very learnedlie. They studie the questions well before hand, and prepares their speeches; but withall the men are exceeding prompt, and well spoken. I doe marvell at the very accurate and extemporall replies that many of them usuallie doe make. When, upon every proposition by itself, and on everie text of Scripture that is brought to confirme it, every man who will hes said his whole minde, and the replies, and duplies, and triplies, are heard; then the most part calls, To the question. Byfield the scribe rises from the table, and comes to the Proloqutor's chair, who, from the scribe's book, reads the proposition, and says, as many as are in opinion that the question is well stated in the proposition, let them say I; when I is heard, he says, as many as think otherwise, say No. If the difference of I's and No's be cleare, as usuallie it is, then the question is ordered by the scribes, and they go on to debate the first Scripture alleadged for proof of the proposition.”