

## The Creeds of the Church

Session 9—The Theology of the Westminster and London Baptist Confessions

### I. **Distinctives of the Westminster Confession**

#### A. **The Word of God**

*Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased. (WC, I.1.)*

Westminster is the first major confession not just to state expressly that the Bible is the only legitimate source of authority, but to actually list the books of the Bible, to avoid confusion. **NB:** Westminster is not establishing the canon, but expressing the canon as it had been historically received, dating back at least to the Muratorian Canon (ca. 170 AD).

#### B. **The Trinity**

*In the unity of the Godhead there be three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son. (WC, II.3.)*

The statements about the Trinity in these confessions adhere closely to the creeds that had preceded them, notably the Nicene Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon.

#### C. **Predestination**

*God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin; nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (WC, III.1.)*

God's sovereign ordering of all things is firmly stated in the Westminster Confession, though, notably, in such a way that "free will" is not damaged.

#### **D. The Son**

*The Son of God, the second Person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof; yet without sin: being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man. (WC, VIII.2.)*

The language concerning the identity, person and nature of the Son, like that concerning the Trinity, is taken directly from the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds.

#### **E. Free Will**

*God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to good or evil.  
Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom and power to will and to do that which is good and well-pleasing to God; but yet mutably, so that he might fall from it.  
Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto. (WC, IX.1–3.)*

Free will is affirmed in the original creation but is said to have been abrogated by the Fall in such a way that the will is no longer truly free but is in slavery to sin. This is developed further in section 3 which asserts that no person can freely choose to obey God. In this way, Westminster follows Augsburg in its statements on free will.

#### **F. Perseverance of the Saints**

*They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved. This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own free-will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof. (WC, XVII.1–2.)*

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is explained in some detail. Interestingly, here the London Baptist Confession goes into somewhat more detail, perhaps as a defense against being lumped together with the Anabaptists, who denied this doctrine.

## **G. The Law**

*Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a Church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament. To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other, now, further than the general equity thereof may require. The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator who gave it. Neither doth Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen, this obligation. (WC, XIX.3–5.)*

Here Westminster helpfully delineates between the different kinds of Old Testament Law. This specification helps us understand the difference between the OT laws against homosexuality (for example) and the OT laws against planting different kinds of crops in one field, using two different types of fabrics in one garment, or the prescriptions of capital punishment for various kinds of offenses. Some laws are ceremonial (abrogated with the coming of Christ). Others are specific to the state of Israel (abrogated outside that nation-state). Others continue to carry moral power.

## **H. Corporate Worship**

*Prayer with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all men; and that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son, by the help of his Holy Spirit, according to his will, with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance; and, if vocal, in a known tongue. As it is of the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath. This Sabbath is to be kept holy unto the Lord when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy. (WC, 3, 7–8.)*

**NB:** the insistence on worship services being undertaken in the spoken tongue of the worshipers. This is an ongoing concern of Protestants—that those worshipping the Lord would understand what they are doing and gain some benefit of teaching from it.

Two other things of note here are (1) the fact that Westminster, *contra* Augsburg, insists on Sunday as a perpetual Lord's Day. Luther and Melancthon argued that keeping Sunday as a day of worship was a matter of Christian liberty; and (2) Westminster specifically prescribes a day of rest from all work and recreation—a position we would also want to submit to Christian liberty than to church prescription.

## **I. The Lord's Supper**

*In this sacrament Christ is not offered up to his Father, nor any real sacrifice made at all for remission of sins of the quick or dead, but a commemoration of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all, and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God for the same; so that the Popish sacrifice of the mass, as they call it, is most abominably injurious to Christ's one, only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of the elect.*

*The outward elements in this sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to him crucified, as that truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ; albeit, in substance and nature, they still remain truly, and only, bread and wine, as they were before.*

*That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine, into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation) by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common-sense and reason; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament; and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions, yea, of gross idolatries.*

*Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses. (WC, XXIX.2, 5–7)*

Westminster firmly denies the Roman Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation (naming it specifically in section 6) and further rejects the Lutheran doctrine of Consubstantiation in section 7, with the phrase, “the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally in, with, or under the bread and wine.” In this way they adopt Calvin's sacramental view. **NB:** When Calvin spoke of the sacrament as “symbolic” he meant something much stronger than we typically mean by that statement, as is illustrated by Westminster's interpretation here: “. . . yet really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers,” and earlier: “The outward elements . . . have such relation to him crucified, as that truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent.”

## **J. The Resurrection of the Dead**

*The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who*

*gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies; and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgement of the great day.*

*Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.*

*At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up with the selfsame bodies, and none other, although with different qualities, which shall be united again to their souls forever.*

*The bodies of the unjust shall, by the power of Christ, be raised to dishonour; the bodies of the just, by his Spirit, unto honour, and be made conformable to his own glorious body.*

(WC, XXXII.1–3.)

The statement on life after death and the resurrection of the dead is fairly straightforward, assuming (as did all Reformation-era confessions) a basically amillennial eschatology.

## **II. Distinctives of the London Baptist Confession**

There are many minor instances of divergence between Westminster and the London Baptist Confession of 1689. Most of these do not affect the doctrinal issues themselves, though some introduce different emphases or nuances that were important to the early Baptists. One such area is how to think about the Covenants in the Old Testament. But for our purposes, we will focus on the four major areas of divergence between the two statements:

### **A. Double Predestination**

*By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated, or foreordained to eternal life through Jesus Christ, to the praise of his glorious grace; others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation, to the praise of his glorious justice. (LBC, III.3.)*

The London Confession avoids double predestination by saying that God predestines some men and angels to eternal life, but others are “left to act in their sin to their just condemnation. Westminster unabashedly equates such a leaving with the active foreordination of God:

*The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice. (WC, III.7.)*

### **B. The Civil Magistrate**

The London Confession noticeably removes this section from Westminster’s article on the civil magistrate:

*The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. (WC, XXIII.3.)*

We see here the traditional Baptist skepticism about the relationship between church and state. It does however agree that:

*Civil magistrates being set up by God for the ends aforesaid; subjection, in all lawful things commanded by them, ought to be yielded by us in the Lord, not only for wrath, but for conscience' sake; and we ought to make supplications and prayers for kings and all that are in authority, that under them we may live a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and honesty. (LBC, XXIV.3.)*

### **C. Church Government**

The London Confession has 15 sections in its article about church government, as compared to Westminster's 6. Items that Westminster assumes (such as the nature of membership in the church, the calling and appointment of church leaders, and the exercise of church authority) the London Baptists had to explain in detail, due to their emphasis on the autonomy of local congregations. **NB:** Even the Baptists insisted on some kind of accountability between local churches, though they refused to grant any authority to meetings held between churches (see section 16).

*A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered), for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty, which he entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons. (LBC, XXVI.8.)*

*In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled, are not entrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers. (LBC, XXVI.16.)*

#### **D. Baptism**

*Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance. The outward element to be used in this ordinance is water, wherein the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance. (LBC, XXIX. 2–4.)*

This is of course the major difference that set the Baptists apart. They prescribe believers' baptism with immersion as the specific mode of baptism.