

THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

If the proverbial man or woman in the street was asked what they thought the Westminster Confession was, one tentative reply might be: 'a political scandal?' Certainly the Confession reflected the politics of its time, the 1640s, but this story really begins in 1560.

That year the Scottish Church was reformed. Roman Catholicism was out, but what replaced it? Over the course of a few days John Knox and others drafted a document called *The Scots Confession*. This set out the core beliefs of the Reformers and was one of a number of such *Confessions* (statements of faith) which appeared across Europe. The Bible was not available in the languages of the people, so these *Confessions* offered useful summaries of key doctrines. This Reformation practice followed that of the early Church which produced the Apostles' Creed, used weekly in St Giles', and the later Nicene Creed.

What form of government did the reformed Scottish Church adopt? At first it was rather *ad hoc*. Elements of presbyterianism were emerging with local kirk sessions and in December 1560 the first General Assembly was held. This comprised six ministers, including Knox, along with lairds and civic representatives. Nationally, the country was divided into synodical areas based on the pre-Reformation dioceses. To each synod was allocated a 'superintendent', some of whom came from the ranks of the former bishops. Presbyteries evolved later.

In 1567 the infant James VI succeeded his mother, Mary Queen of Scots. James was brought up Protestant, but with a strong preference for Episcopal rather than Presbyterian Church government. He once famously observed that 'presbytery agreeth as much with monarchy as God with the devil'. In 1603 James succeeded Elizabeth on the English throne and soon embarked on a policy aimed at uniting the churches north and south of the border under bishops. On his succession in 1625 James' son, Charles I, pursued the same policy with even greater vigour.

Every action produces a counter reaction and by the 1640s an alliance was formed between Scottish presbyterians and English parliamentarians. This included the aim of uniting the churches in both countries under a Presbyterian polity, and found practical expression in an Assembly convened at Westminster. From this emerged the *Westminster Confession of Faith* along with other texts, including the *Shorter and Longer Catechisms*. The General Assembly of 1647 and the Scottish Parliament in 1649 endorsed the Confession which was declared to be 'the public and avowed Confession of the Church, containing the sum and substance of the faith of the Reformed Church'. Effectively this *Westminster Confession* superseded the earlier the *Scots Confession*.

The two documents are quite different, with the later one reflecting the prevailing Calvinist theology and a strong emphasis on double predestination. It was this doctrine that Burns caricatured in his poem *Holy Willie's Prayer*, depicting a whimsical God who sends 'aen to Heaven an' ten to Hell/a' for Thy glory/and no for onie gude or ill/they've done afore Thee.' In 1690 the Church of Scotland was eventually settled as Presbyterian, with ministers and elders required to subscribe the *Westminster Confession*. However, many who had served under the preceding Episcopal regime adhered to the *Scots Confession* and refused. Their 'punishment' was to be denied seats in the Church courts, though they could remain in their parishes. Some ministers today might consider that not a bad deal!

Over the centuries questions have arisen over the role of the *Westminster Confession* in the life of the Church. The Kirk's present constitution, dating from the 1929 re-union, declared it to be the Church's 'Subordinate Standard', the Supreme Standard being the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Still today ministers, elders and deacons sign a formula declaring their belief in 'the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith' expressed in the Confession. The fact remains, though, that with the passage of time the Confession itself it has become less and less accessible, both in terms of accessing a copy and in terms of relating to its style and language. Fifty years ago a General Assembly debate initiated a six-year review which revealed overwhelming support for changing the Confession's role from 'Subordinate Standard' to 'Historic Statement of the Faith of the Reformed Church'. At the same time a fresh statement of core beliefs was prepared for the assent of those being ordained. However, when the final vote came in 1974 the General Assembly effectively kicked the matter into the long grass, where it remains to this day.

A powerful illustration of the problem emerged in 1986. This was four years after Pope John Paul II's ground-breaking visit to Scotland. An elder from Stirling, Dr Kenneth Stewart, urged the General Assembly to dissociate the Church from phrases in the Confession, such as 'synagogues of Satan' and 'Son of Perdition', when referring to the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope. The Assembly readily agreed; nevertheless such seventeenth century characterisations remain on the face of a document the Kirk continues to hold as its 'subordinate standard'.

Earlier this year I successfully persuaded my Presbytery of Melrose and Peebles to bring an Overture to the General Assembly, asking the Theological Forum to review the whole matter. The Westminster Confession is indeed a significant historic statement of the faith of the Reformed Church. However, when it comes to commending that faith today I suggest we need a new approach which can relate to today's people and today's world.

I began this article with a facetious reference to political scandal. Certainly the Confession reflects the politics of the mid-seventeenth century; but perhaps there is also an element of scandal that, nearly four centuries on, we still find ourselves with a 'Subordinate Standard' which is more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

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