

Confession and Catechisms

About Westminster Confession

View Confession In 1643, during a period of civil war, the English "Long Parliament" (under the control of Presbyterian Puritans) convened an Assembly of Divines (mostly Puritan ministers, including a few influential Scottish commissioners) at Westminster Abbey in London. Their task was to advise Parliament on how to bring the Church of England into greater conformity with the Church of Scotland and the Continental Reformed churches. The Westminster Assembly produced documents on doctrine, church government, and worship that have largely defined Presbyterianism down to this day. These documents included a Confession of Faith (1646), a Larger Catechism (1647), and a Shorter Catechism (1647), often collectively called "the Westminster standards." Parliamentary efforts to reconstitute the established Church of England along Presbyterian lines were soon thwarted by the rise to power of Cromwell (who favored Independency) and the expulsion of Presbyterians from Parliament in 1648, and then the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, which quickly led to the reinstatement of Episcopacy and the suppression of Puritanism. But things were different in Scotland. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland adopted the Confession of Faith in 1647 and the Catechisms in 1648. The Scottish Parliament ratified them in 1649 and again (after a time of political and religious strife) in 1690. The Presbyterian character of the Church of Scotland was safeguarded when Scotland and England were united under one crown in 1707. Numerous Presbyterian bodies have been formed since then, both in the United Kingdom and around the world, and they have always been constituted on the basis of the Westminster standards (although declension from them has sometimes followed). When the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was formed in 1788, it adopted the Westminster standards, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures. However, it revised chapters 20.4, 23.3, and 31.2 of the Confession, basically removing the civil magistrate (i.e., the state) from involvement in ecclesiastical matters. It also removed the phrase "tolerating a false religion" from the list of sins forbidden in Answer 109 of the Larger Catechism, and replaced "depopulations" in Answer 142 with "depredation." The Confession was amended again in 1887, when the final sentence of chapter 24.4, which forbade the marrying of the close kindred of one's deceased spouse, was removed. The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. adopted more sweeping revisions of its Confession in 1903. Chapter 16.7, on the works of unregenerate men, was rewritten. The last sentence of chapter 22.3, which forbade the refusing of a proper oath when imposed by lawful authority, was removed. Chapter 25.6, on the head of the church, was rewritten, and the identification of the Roman Catholic pope as the Antichrist was removed. Chapter 34 ("Of the Holy Spirit") was added. Chapter 35 ("Of the Love of God and Missions") was also added. A "Declaratory Statement" explaining chapters 3 and 10.3 (on election and salvation) was appended. The general effect of these additions was to soften the Calvinism of the Confession. In June 1936, the First General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (called the Presbyterian Church of America until 1939) met to constitute a new denomination as the spiritual heir of the old Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., which had fallen under modernist control. It elected a Committee on the Constitution and charged it to "present for adoption to the General Assembly meeting in the autumn of 1936 the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as the confession of the faith of this church." The Committee was instructed to "take as the basis of its consideration the particular form of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms which appears in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1934 edition." The Committee was empowered to recommend the elimination (or retention) of changes to the Confession made in 1903, but to recommend no other changes to "that form of these Standards." Accordingly, the Committee on the Constitution (consisting of Ned B. Stonehouse [chairman], J. Gresham Machen [ex officio], and Murray Forst Thompson) recommended to the Second General Assembly, meeting in November 1936, that the Confession of Faith and Catechisms be adopted "in the form which they possessed" before the revisions of 1903 (including the Declaratory Statement) were introduced, with two exceptions. The Committee recommended that the change in chapter 22.3 and the removal of the reference to the pope as the Antichrist (but not the other changes) in chapter 25.6 be retained. The Assembly adopted these recommendations. It also rejected a proposal to append a declaratory statement to the Confession that would have declared premillennialism to be consistent with the church standards. As a preliminary step toward the printing of the doctrinal standards of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Seventh General Assembly (1940) established a Committee on Texts and Proof Texts (consisting of John Murray [chairman], E. J. Young, and Ned B. Stonehouse, who was replaced in 1941 by John H. Skilton) to study the texts and proof texts of those documents. That Committee submitted to the Eighteenth General Assembly (1951) "the text of the Confession of Faith, together with the proof texts as revised by the Committee." The text, except for the revisions that had been adopted by the Second General Assembly in 1936, was "derived from the original manuscript written by Cornelius Burges in 1646, edited by S. W. Carruthers [in 1937] and published by the Presbyterian Church of England in 1946." That text of the Confession, with a few corrections, was adopted by the Twenty-second General Assembly (1955), approved by nearly all the presbyteries, and adopted again by the Twenty-third General Assembly (1956). The proof texts prepared by the Committee were accepted for publication. The Confession was then published with these proof texts (as citations, not full texts) by the Committee on Christian Education and reprinted by Great Commission Publications. The Thirty-fourth General Assembly (1967) elected a Committee on Proof Texts for the Catechisms (consisting of E. J. Young [chairman], who died in 1968 and was replaced by John Murray [who died in 1975] and Norman Shepherd, John H. Skilton [the new chairman], George W. Marston, and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. [beginning in 1971]) to prepare a revised list of proof texts for the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. The Committee presented a list of proof texts for the Shorter Catechism to the Forty-fourth General Assembly (1977), and the Forty-fifth General Assembly (1978) approved them for publication in an edition of the Shorter Catechism. Great Commission Publications then printed the Shorter Catechism with these proof texts (as citations, not full texts). The Sixty-sixth General Assembly (1999) elected a Committee on Proof Texts for the Larger Catechism (consisting of Stephen A. Pribble [chairman], George W. Knight III, Steven F. Miller, and Peter J. Wallace). It

presented a list of proof texts to the Sixty-seventh General Assembly (2000), and the Sixty-eighth General Assembly (2001) approved the proof texts (with corrections) for publication. One additional change was made by the Seventy-first General Assembly (2004). The Assembly in 2001 also authorized the Committee on Christian Education to publish the doctrinal standards of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, with the proof texts prepared by the various Committees over the years. Accordingly, this volume presents to the church the text of the Confession of Faith, as settled upon in 1956, and the text of the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as received in 1936. It also includes a Scripture index to the proof texts. It is a companion volume to *The Book of Church Order*, which contains the other constitutional documents of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, namely, the Form of Government, the Book of Discipline, and the Directory for the Public Worship of God. The Scripture proof texts were originally prepared by the Westminster divines, revised over the years by a succession of committees, and approved for publication by various general assemblies of the OPC, but are not a part of the constitution itself. At the direction of the Sixty-eighth General Assembly, these proof texts are presented largely in full. The King James Version has been used, without prejudice to other translations, since this is the English text that was in use at the time of the Westminster Assembly, the language of which is at times reflected in the Confession and Catechisms. The Committee on Christian Education has endeavored to publish the texts and proof texts of the Confession and Catechisms as accurately as possible, that is, in accordance with the intention of the general assemblies which adopted them. In ascertaining the approved texts and proof texts, it has been assumed that the general assemblies desired errors, either in the manuscripts with which they were presented, or in the documents as printed, to be corrected. Spelling and capitalization has been regularized and modernized, but the original punctuation and verb forms have been retained. Chapters and sections of the Confession are now enumerated with Arabic numerals, not Roman numerals. The footnotes to the Confession and Catechisms, containing the proof texts, are enumerated in the traditional manner, that is, by letters of the alphabet (omitting j and v, as alternative forms for i and u in the Latin alphabet). In the Confession, the footnotes for each chapter begin with a; if z is reached, another series of letters begins with a. For each of the Catechisms, one series of letters follows another without interruption. The footnote references in the text of the Confession follow the pattern of the original Westminster Confession (except where the text has been amended), but the references in the Catechisms are placed somewhat differently than they were in the past. Where individual answers (or sections of answers) in the Larger Catechism require more than one series of letters (i.e., LC 105, 109, 113, 135, 142, 145, and 151.3), the letters in the second series are distinguished by the prime symbol. Thus, for example, in LC 145, the references begin with n, and, after m is reached, they continue with n'. This will make the Scripture index easier to use. As a rule, the entire text of the cited proof text is presented, but in a few cases part of an indicated verse has been elided because it is not relevant. Lengthy proof texts (sometimes amounting to one or more full chapters) have been shortened, but enough Scripture is quoted in these instances to establish the doctrine in view. In such cases, the omitted material is marked by an ellipsis. An ellipsis also separates verses when the proof text is not a continuous text. Sometimes a verse does not form a complete sentence. (Our chapter and verse divisions were not part of the original text of Scripture, but were added, sometimes in unhelpful places, by later editors.) To alert the reader to the fact that a quoted verse begins in the middle of a sentence, an ellipsis has been placed at the beginning of it. And when a verse ends without forming a sentence, an ellipsis has been placed at the end of it. (If the verse forms a grammatical sentence, no ellipsis is added, even though it does not form a complete sentence in the biblical text.) In the King James Version, each verse begins a new paragraph, and the first word of each verse is capitalized, regardless of its place in the sentence. Also, the first word of each chapter is set entirely in capital letters. In our proof texts, however, these conventions have not been followed. Rather, the biblical text of each proof text runs continuously and is capitalized according to the rules of ordinary prose. However, the KJV's practice of capitalizing the first word of quotations (in lieu of quotation marks) has been retained.