

## HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS

### INTRODUCTION

Do we really need such a detailed Confession? Would a shorter summary of core doctrines not be more appropriate?

- Everyone has a systematic theology – there is an honesty in writing it down and making it accessible so that it can be assessed in light of Scripture
- When beliefs are stated with clarity and detail it aids communication and has the power to promote gospel unity
- In our secular world an individual believer needs more than a minimalist summary – what is true of individuals is also true of churches

We should be under no illusion that renewed emphasis upon the creed will in and of itself renew the life of the church: it will not. The church is created and renewed through Word and Spirit. Everything else—love of the brethren, holiness, proclamation, confession—is dependent upon them. Yet it is scarcely possible to envisage substantial renewal of the life of the church without renewal of its confessional life. There are many conditions for such renewal. One is real governance of the church's practice and decision-making not by ill-digested cultural analysis but by reference to the credal rendering of the biblical gospel. Another is recovery of the kind of theology which sees itself as an apostolic task, and does not believe itself entitled or competent to reinvent or subvert the Christian tradition. A third, rarely noticed, condition is the need for a recovery of symbolics (the study of creeds and confessions) as part of the theological curriculum—so much more edifying than most of what fills the seminary day. But alongside these are required habits of mind and heart: love of the gospel, docility in face of our forebears, readiness for responsibility and venture, a freedom from concern for reputation, a proper self-distrust. None of these things can be cultivated; they are the Spirit's gifts, and the Spirit alone must do his work. What we may do—and must do—is cry to God, who alone works great marvels.

John Webster, 'Confession and Confessions' in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (T&T Clark, 2005), 83.

### POST-REFORMATION REFORMED ORTHODOXY

Richard Muller is among the revisionist scholars who have revolutionised our understanding of post-Reformation theology e.g. *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford, 2004) and *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, 2003).

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) is a comprehensive restatement of British Reformed Orthodoxy at the beginning of the era of high orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

### THREE KEY REVISIONIST INSIGHTS

1. Theological writing must be understood in its context and according to its purpose – our ability to do this has been transformed by the work of Chad van Dixhoorn.<sup>2</sup>
2. Reformed Orthodoxy stands in a critical, but largely positive, relation to late medieval theology
3. Reformed Orthodoxy has a strong emphasis on exegesis e.g.
  - Thomas Gataker
  - Lazarus Seaman

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Calvinist consensus of early Stuart Britain under James I (1603-25)

- The Irish Articles (1615)
- The British delegation to the Synod of Dort (1618-19)

This consensus is undermined during the reign of Charles I (1625-49)

- William Laud becomes archbishop of Canterbury (1633)
- The anti-Calvinist agenda of the Laudians

1637 Charles attempts to impose his political and religious will on the Scots

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<sup>1</sup> Carl R. Trueman, 'Reformed Orthodoxy in Britain', in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy* ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Brill, 2013), 261-93.

<sup>2</sup> Chad van Dixhoorn (ed.), *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1652* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

1638 The Scots sign the National Covenant

1640 April – the Short Parliament

September – Convocation requires the notorious '*et cetera* oath'

November – The Long Parliament begins

1641 October – Irish Rebellion

November – Parliament passes the Grand Remonstrance requesting 'a General Synod of the most grave, pious, learned, and judicious divines of this Island, assisted by some from foreign parts, professing the same religion with us; who may consider of all things necessary for the peace and good government of the Church'.

1642 January – Parliament agrees to a synod

Summer – The English civil war begins

1643 June 12 – A parliamentary ordinance called for the gathering of 'an Assembly of Learned, and Godly Divines' in order to advise on 'a further and more perfect Reformation'.

July 1 – The Assembly formally opens. The tasks before it were 'setling . . . the government and liturgy' of the church 'as shall be most agreeable to the Word of God', and to 'vindicate' the church's doctrine 'from false aspersions and interpretations', showing that it was in accordance with the Church of Scotland and the Reformed Churches abroad.

August-September – The Solemn League and Covenant was drawn up between Scotland and the English Parliament. It committed England, Scotland and Ireland to form 'the neerest conjunction and Uniformity in Religion'. To achieve this unity, the assembly was to produce a 'confession of faith, form of church-government, directory for worship' and a directory for 'catechising'.

## POLEMICAL CONTEXT

A defence of Reformed Orthodoxy against the claims of:

### 1. Roman Catholicism

- The ongoing Thirty Years' War (1618-48)
- Francisco Suárez (1548-1617) and Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621)
- Milton describes how 'hatred of popery was seen as a manifestation of true religion, a testimony of the individual's commitment to God. This was not just the view of extreme puritans, but was also strongly maintained by establishment divines'.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. Arminianism – particularly in the British context, the anti-Calvinists.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Socinianism – named after the Italian Fausto Sozzini (1539–1604), this was viewed as 'the very nadir of heresy'.<sup>5</sup> It was committed to:

- Thoroughgoing Biblicism – ridding theology of philosophy in order to get back to the bare text of Scripture; and
- Dogged rationalism – this led to anti-Trinitarianism.

### 4. Antinomianism – best understood as exalting the objective work of Christ in such a way as to play down, or even deny, the role of the moral law in the Christian life.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought 1600-1640* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c. 1590-1640* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Willem van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* (Reformation Heritage, 2011), 122. See also Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcomed Guest?* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Carl R. Trueman, 'Reformed Orthodoxy in Britain, in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, 278. See Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004); David R. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

## THE GREAT TRADITION

The WCF defines the church as:

- 25.2 The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel, (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all these throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children.

This points to an important aspect of Reformed identity: the Reformed church is an expression of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

That the Westminster divines saw themselves in continuity with the historic church needs little argument for those who have read their writings or considered the records of the debate. William Twisse, prolocutor of the Assembly, had himself edited the works of Thomas Bradwardine. The divines' writings are full of citations of Augustine. Their debates are replete with references to the Fathers and medieval, far too many to list here.<sup>7</sup>

None of this should be surprising. When the great English Reformer William Perkins published his famous work he was doing the work of a reformer not a sectarian.

*A reformed Catholike, or, A declaration shewing how neere we may come to the present Church of Rome in sundrie points of religion, and wherein we must for euer depart from them : with an advertisement to all fauourers of the Romane religion, shewing that the said religion is against the Catholike principles and grounds of the catechisme (1597)*

This was also true of Calvin. The work of Richard Muller and others has clearly demonstrated Calvin's continuity with the western Catholic tradition:

It is worth recognizing from the outset that the Reformation altered comparatively few of the major *loci* of theology: the doctrines of justification, the sacraments, and the church received the greatest emphasis, while the doctrines of God, the trinity, creation, providence, predestination, and the last things were taken over by the magisterial Reformation virtually without alteration.<sup>8</sup>

This helps us to understand the claim that these Westminster divines, 'Men for all Seasons', were Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed. Westminster is a *reforming* moment in the history of the western Catholic tradition – the divines sought to retain all that was good and life-giving and to reform where necessary under the authority of the Word of

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), 84-95.

<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 39. See also, Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (T&T Clark, 1999), 3: 'Calvin cites the fathers primarily as witnesses for the defence, as authorities to which to appeal ... He also sometimes cites them for literary reasons, because they have stated something elegantly.'

God. They retained the theology and language of the creedal tradition and continually tipped their hats to theological discussions from Christian history.

Writing at the end of the long Reformation, the members of the Westminster Assembly (1643-1653) were eager to harvest the best biblical exegesis of the Reformers, the most useful doctrinal structures of the medieval theologians, and the most enduring insights of the church fathers. The members of the assembly read widely from all three of these groups and invested enormous time and energy in synthesizing their findings into this 12,000-word document.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Banner of Truth, 2014), xix.