





# *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*

*Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary  
of the Westminster Assembly*

## **Volume 1**



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## **MENTOR**

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## *Foreword*

Almost a decade ago we marked the three hundred fiftieth anniversary of the English Parliament's ordinance calling for the historic Westminster Assembly (1643-1649/52). Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) has a special interest in the promotion of the study of the Assembly since the *Confession* serves as our basic doctrinal position. Because we passionately believe these truths, RTS has aimed to produce pastors who believe and promote them in a way that is warmly and winsomely Reformed and biblically ecumenical, spreading the influence of these truths as broadly as possible.

This set of books is published with a view to introducing the student to some of the main issues in the history, theology and literature of the Assembly, and in hopes of spurring new interest in the work of the Westminster divines. Our aims, however, are not merely academic. They are also pastoral and devotional. We hope to provide material that will prove both interesting and helpful to the scholars, ministers, elders, candidates and congregations of the various evangelical churches influenced by the Westminster Assembly.

We catch something of the pastoral and devotional heart of the Assembly in the words of Samuel Rutherford (a Scottish commissioner to the Assembly), speaking of his Savior, Jesus Christ: "I am so in love with His love, that if His love were not in heaven, I should not be willing to go thither." This kind of

passionate adoration of Christ is at the heart of Reformed theology at its best, and that is the sort of devotion we seek to promote through the work of Reformed Theological Seminary: love for God, love for his truth, love for Christ, love for people. Our message is “A mind for truth, a heart for God.”

There is much indeed to feed our souls (as well as to strengthen our minds) which we can learn from these forefathers in the faith. The Westminster Assembly has provided for us both a profound, reverent, moving exposition of the doctrines of the Bible, and a worthy model of the function of truth in the pursuit of godliness.

Personally, my parents led me to memorize the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* when I was a young boy. Later I was given a copy of the complete *Westminster Standards* by my home church, First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi, along with all others in that congregation when we completed our secondary education. My parents made sure that copy was packed in my luggage when I left home for undergraduate studies. A number of times as I discussed issues with others at Vanderbilt University, I turned to the *Westminster Confession* for guidance into the truths of Scripture. In particular the *Confession* was a great help to me in those days in my understanding and teaching on the subject of assurance of salvation and for my own personal comfort and encouragement in this vital area of the Christian life.

May our Sovereign God use these volumes to reacquaint His people with the rich spiritual heritage bequeathed to them by their Puritan forefathers and to spur them on to further study of their “affectionate, practical” theology.

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March 25, 2003

## *Introduction*

June of 1993, February of 1999 and March of 2002 respectively marked the three hundred fiftieth anniversaries of the seating, the final session and the informal dissolution of the historic Westminster Assembly. As you know, that godly gathering of divines met steadily throughout the ravages of the English Civil War, from 1643 to 1649, patiently putting together a testimony of the faith in hopes of uniting the Reformed movement in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland (and even continental Europe), in doctrine, worship, discipline and church government. Hence, there have been over the last decade a number of conferences and commemorations celebrating the memory of that venerable convention.

In the early 1990s, with the encouragement of the administration of Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, MS; Orlando, FL; Charlotte, NC; Washington, DC; Atlanta, GA), a group of eminent scholars from around the world was approached to participate in the production of literature (both popular and academic) designed to discuss and debate the most important issues in current post-Reformation studies, as well as promote interest in the Westminster Assembly and its work. This effort was designated “The Westminster Assembly Project” and received encouragement from many quarters, not the least of which came from the then-President of RTS, Dr. Luder G. Whitlock, Jr. RTS has been unwavering in its support of this long-standing project of scholarship and the whole editorial team is grateful for it. I am especially appreciative of the

continuing interest and assistance of two good friends, RTS Vice President, Robert J. Bailey (a Ruling Elder of First Presbyterian Church, Yazoo City, Mississippi) and our new President of RTS, Dr. Robert C. “Ric” Cannada, Jr.

The distinguished historian of the Reformation and post-Reformation eras, Richard Muller of Calvin Theological Seminary, calls the Westminster Assembly Project “a most worthy undertaking and, to my mind, one that is quite timely not only because of the anniversary of the Assembly but also because of the clear need in Presbyterian and Reformed circles for scholarly work on the Reformed tradition and its confessions.” And so, we have been busy for over a decade researching, producing literature and preparing for a multi-volume set of scholarly essays on various subjects related to the work of the Westminster Assembly. This volume is the first of three projected, with another planned for release this year. The timing of its publication, though much delayed, has turned out to be providentially propitious. Chad Van Dixhoorn’s discovery of long forgotten and never before transcribed or published minutes of the Westminster Assembly has scholars keenly interested. Westminster Seminary’s (Philadelphia, PA) announcement of a new center for the study of the Westminster Assembly will bring a fresh attention to this subject area.

Meanwhile, we have already produced a brief “user-friendly” bibliography of the Assembly (in conjunction with the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council commemoration) called *The Westminster Assembly: A Guide to Basic Bibliography*, (Greenville: **Reformed Academic Press**, 1993), a revised version of William Beveridge’s *Short History of the Westminster Assembly*, (Greenville: **Reformed Academic Press**, 1993) which has received some nice commendations,<sup>1</sup> a new

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<sup>1</sup>“The rediscovery of reformed theology throughout the world has given fresh relevance to the Westminster Divines’ classical exposition of biblical

edition of S.W. Carruthers', *Everyday Work of the Westminster Assembly*, (Greenville: **Reformed Academic Press**, 1994), a reprint of S.W. Carruthers', *The Westminster Confession: The Preparation and Printing of its Seven Leading Editions and A Critical Edition*, (Greenville: **Reformed Academic Press**, 1995), and a chain of articles called "The Belgic Confession: A View from Westminster," in the Presbyterian Perspective Series in **Christian Observer** 1995-1996. Soon to be released is J. V. Fesko's, *Diversity within the Reformed Tradition: Supra- and Infralapsarianism in Calvin, Dort, and Westminster*, (Greenville: **Reformed Academic Press**, 2003), and two more volumes in this three volume set on *The Westminster Confession in the 21st Century* (Tain: Christian Focus, 2003-2004). Among the other major projects which have been initiated is a comprehensive annotated bibliography on the Assembly - *The Westminster Assembly: A Comprehensive and Selectively Annotated Bibliography*.

One of our major focuses is the Westminster theology (and the Puritan/Protestant Scholastic legacy) and its relation to the Reformed tradition as a whole. In particular, the Westminster Assembly Project aims to discuss the Westminster theology in its interrelationship to the earlier Reformed tradition—arguing for the basic continuity between Calvin and Calvinism, without ignoring developments and discontinuities. The seventeenth-century

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teaching. To an extraordinary degree they studied in depth the same issues which trouble and challenge the church today, and their work continues to serve as an invaluable guide. In this context, Professor Ligon Duncan's fine edited version of William Beveridge's valuable study of the Assembly should be widely welcomed. Its appearance augurs well for the success and usefulness of the important work of the Westminster Assembly Project" (Sinclair B. Ferguson). Douglas F. Kelly has added: "...beautifully done; the notes and bibliography are extremely helpful for both historical and contemporary scholarship relating to the Westminster Standards. This will prove to be another incentive to the church to maintain and further our great doctrinal heritage for the rising generation."

Reformed theologians have not fared well in the hands of late nineteenth and twentieth century historical theologians. We hope to continue the current redress of that imbalance (*à la mode de* Muller, Clark, Trueman, Marsden and others) and to contribute to the rectification of a common, but bad, historiography.

The purpose of these volumes, then, is to **inform, evaluate, and commend**. We wish to inform the reader about the Assembly in its historical, theological, political and social setting. Further, we wish to challenge unhistorical assertions commonly made about Westminster in its relation to both earlier and later Reformed theology, and to provide fresh evaluation of its place in and contribution to the Calvinian tradition. Finally, we wish to commend the Westminster theology as a faithful expression of clear-headed Christian thinking to a generation in the thralls of dying modernity and nascent postmodernity.

There are many reasons why it would be beneficial for the scholars, ministers, elders, students and congregations of the various Reformed churches to study the Westminster Assembly. We will mention a few of them here. First, there is a *pastoral* reason. That learned gathering of divines was representative of a movement which bequeathed to us a tradition of pastoral theology unsurpassed in the history of Christianity in the English-speaking world. We need to hear them because a significant proportion of the church of our day has decided that its ministry should be carried out pragmatically rather than theologically, while another quadrant (more theologically sophisticated, it should be said) places a premium on contextualization and general revelation in its theology of ministry, at the expense of the divine modes and norms of church life clearly set forth in the Scriptures. The Puritans were not so tempted by such modern folly. The members of the Assembly (in their corporate work, lives and writings) offer to us a pattern of ministry that was biblically grounded, theologically informed, culturally engaged and pastorally effective.



Second, there is an *historical* reason. It hardly needs to be said that the work of Westminster has served for over three and a half centuries as the basic doctrinal formulary for Presbyterianism worldwide, but it has also been influential in several other Protestant traditions. Thus the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms* have made an historical contribution to the whole Reformed tradition's understanding of Christian faith and life, and have functioned either as the basis of or a major influence on the public theology not only of Presbyterianism, but also of the historic Baptist churches (e.g., via the *Second London Confession* of 1689, adopted as the *Philadelphia Confession* in 1742), the Congregational churches (e.g., via the *Savoy Declaration* of 1658) and the Anglican tradition. This alone argues for its historical importance and hence the value of its study. Nevertheless, it may be further suggested that knowledge and appreciation of the times and teachings of Westminster can serve to inoculate us against the false teachings and superficialities of our own age. "Reading old books," C.S. Lewis once said, keeps "the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds" so that we are not so prone to modern errors and trivialities.

Third, there is a *theological* reason. All Christians are systematic theologians, the question is whether we are going to be good ones or bad ones. The mastering of the theology of Westminster will provide the minister with a wholesome and comprehensive grasp of biblical truth, which will serve our systematic theology better than prevalent alternatives in today's market. The scope and precision of the Assembly's product is an especially helpful corrective to the current, seemingly ubiquitous, anti-systematic theology sentiment, and to contemporary tendencies towards minimalism and reductionism. Indeed, many divinity halls and ecclesiastical assemblies are populated these days by self-styled "biblical theologians," (which usually means merely thematic theologians who harbor deep suspicions of the categories of

historical theology, precise distinctions and larger theological systems, who have not themselves done the hard work of theological synthesis, who often unreflectively import their own philosophical presuppositions into their exegesis and redemptive historical method, while at the same time criticizing “scholastic theology” for doing this very thing, and who ironically have a more dominating, if smaller and narrower, theological grid than any post-Reformation scholastic you can name). The result of this is the total domination of the canon by “single issue” theologues – every passage turns out to be about whatever is the particular bee in their bonnet. Hence, their protest against Protestant scholastic theology turns out to be a case of the pot calling the kettle black, and that unfairly. It was Karl Barth who said “Fear of scholasticism is the mark of a false prophet.” For once, he was right. The Assembly was not afraid of exactitude, distinctions, deductions, or historic categories, and yet was philosophically more self-aware (and self-critical) than most contemporary theologians.

Fourth, there is a *devotional* reason. The devotional value of the Westminster documents has never before been so underestimated as it is today. And yet there waits a deep pool of living water for the refreshing of the soul for any who will take the time to drink. The divines provide for us both a profound, reverent, affectionate exposition of the doctrines of the Bible, and a worthy model of the function of truth in the pursuit of godliness, thus making a wonderful contribution to the cultivation of “Christian piety” or “heart religion.” Though it is often compared unfavorably to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Westminster’s *Shorter Catechism* is far from cold and academic, rather we find in it a warm, evangelical expression of the Christian faith. This is nowhere more evident than in the very first question and answer of the Catechism: What is the chief end of man? A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. (See 1 Corinthians 10:31 and Psalm 73:25-26). You can’t get more

basic or practical than this. What is the meaning of life? What is our purpose in life? What are we here for? If you get the answer to this question wrong, everything else will go wrong. To glorify God is to know him, trust him and serve him, according to his word. To enjoy him is to seek him as our greatest good and our greatest desire. We glorify him in enjoying him, and enjoy him in glorifying him. Nothing gloomy or pedantic about that!

For all those reasons (and more) the study of the Westminster Assembly is never a waste of time. To make the exercise even more valuable, we have assembled contributions from an impressive list of students of Westminster and its context: **William S. Barker**, former Dean of Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia, PA, USA), an outstanding scholar of English Puritanism; **David B. Calhoun**, Professor of Church History at Covenant Theological Seminary (St Louis, MO, USA), an expert in the Princeton Theology; **Hugh Cartwright**, formerly of the Free Church of Scotland College (Edinburgh, UK) and now in the Free Presbyterian Church; **Mark E. Dever**, brilliant Puritan scholar, author of a major academic work on Richard Sibbes, and senior minister of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church (Washington, DC, USA); **Sinclair B. Ferguson**, formerly of Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia, PA, USA), and St. George's Tron Kirk in Glasgow, Scotland, a widely known author and theologian; **Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.** of Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia, PA, USA), an outstanding exegete and theologian, known for his research on the Sabbath in the Reformed tradition; **Timothy George**, Dean of the Beeson School of Divinity, Samford University, (Birmingham, AL, USA), world class Baptist historian; **Stewart D. Gill**, formerly of the Presbyterian Theological Hall (Melbourne, Australia), now Dean and Deputy Warden, Trinity College and Senior Fellow, Department of History, University of Melbourne (Victoria, Australia); **W. Robert Godfrey**, President of Westminster

Theological Seminary (Escondido, CA, USA); **David W. Hall**, formerly of the Covenant Presbyterian Church (Oak Ridge, TN, USA) and well-known scholar of and author on the Westminster Assembly; **Darryl G. Hart**, formerly of Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia, PA, USA), now Dean of Westminster Theological Seminary (Escondido, CA, USA), exceptional church historian; **Paul Helm**, formerly of King's College (London, UK), noted author on issues relating to Calvin and Calvinism; **Michael S. Horton**, of Westminster Theological Seminary (Escondido, CA, USA) and President of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals (Philadelphia, PA, USA); **Douglas F. Kelly**, Jordan Professor of Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary (Charlotte, NC, USA); **Andrew T.B. McGowan**, Principal of the Highland Theological College (Dingwall, Scotland), known for his knowledge of Scottish Historical Theology; **Donald Macleod**, Principal of the Free Church of Scotland College (Edinburgh, Scotland), first order systematic theologian and master of Scottish theology; **James L. Macleod**, formerly of the University of Nottingham (Nottingham, UK) and now in the Department of History, University of Evansville, Indiana; **W. David J. McKay**, of the Ballylaggan Reformed Presbyterian Church (Aghadowey, Northern Ireland, UK); **Nicholas R. Needham** of the Highland Theological College (Dingwall, Scotland); **J.I. Packer**, of Regent College, (Vancouver, Canada); **Robert L. Reymond**, of Knox Theological Seminary (Ft. Lauderdale, FL, USA); **O. Palmer Robertson**, President of African Bible College (Uganda, Africa); **Morton H. Smith**, of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Taylors, SC, USA); **Wayne R. Spear** of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Pittsburgh, PA, USA); **Andrew A. Woolsey** of the Crumlin Evangelical Presbyterian Church (Crumlin, Northern Ireland, UK); **David F. Wright**, of New College, University of Edinburgh (Edinburgh, Scotland); and more.

The topics we cover in this set are wide-ranging, from the history of the Westminster Assembly Commemorations; to recent objections to the Covenant Theology of Westminster Confession; the Holy Spirit in the Westminster Confession; Westminster and the relationship of Church and State (from both Scottish and American perspectives); the theology of the Westminster Larger Catechism; the Westminster doctrine of union with Christ; Westminster and Sanctification; Westminster on the Sabbath; the Westminster Doctrine of Scripture; Baptists and Westminster; Princeton and the Westminster Confession; Westminster and the Regulative Principle; Scotland and the Westminster Confession; Westminster and Australian Presbyterians; Calvin, Westminster and Assurance; Westminster and Protestant Scholasticism; revision of the Westminster Confession and the Free Church Declaratory Act of 1892; the Confession in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Debate; Westminster Confession and Missions; Westminster and the Atonement; Finney's Attacks on Westminster; Westminster and Worship: Psalms, Hymns?, & Musical Instruments?; and more.

In this volume the essays commence with David Hall's interesting "History of Westminster Assembly Commemorations" which has a fascinating subplot regarding what the commemorations themselves tell us about the denominations celebrating the Assembly. Then there is Wayne Spear's "Word and Spirit in the Westminster Confession" – which provides a nice, if partial rebuttal to the old and outmoded Rogers-McKim thesis on the Reformed doctrine of Scripture. O. Palmer Robertson provides a pastoral overview of "The Holy Spirit in the Westminster Confession" which undercuts the charge (often heard) that the role of the Holy Spirit is underplayed in the Westminster Confession. We are introduced to the "Theology of the Larger Catechism" by Morton H. Smith, a well-known scholar of Westminster, and Richard B. Gaffin critically but appreciatively

engages the Confession on the currently controversial matter of “Westminster and the Sabbath.” Dean Timothy George of the Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, gives us a helpful treatment of “Baptists and the Westminster Confession” thus reminding us of the importance of Westminster to and in that ecclesial tradition. David F. Wright of the University of Edinburgh brings to bear his expertise in the area of the doctrine of baptism to engage the debate about baptismal realism, regeneration and efficacy in his chapter “Baptism at the Westminster Assembly” – his findings are nuanced and provocative. Andrew McGowan, an expert in Scottish Federal Theology, demonstrates the fundamental theological continuity in pre-Westminster and post-Westminster Scottish theology (contrary to regnant historical mythology) in “Edinburgh to Westminster,” while W.D.J. McKay explores the influence of the Scottish participants in the Assembly in “Scotland and the Westminster Assembly. Stewart Gill’s “The Battle for the Westminster Confession in Australia” gives us insight into a sad instance of doctrinal erosion in a case study important to all who aspire to work within and maintain the integrity of confessional churches. Mark E. Dever’s chapter on “Calvin, Westminster and Assurance” counters the flawed but common argument (typified in the Kendal thesis) that the Puritan tradition fundamentally undercut the Calvinian doctrine of assurance. This is an important point in the larger debate regarding Calvin and Calvinism. J. L. Macleod takes a hard look at “Revision of the Westminster Confession (Declaratory Act of 1892)” and the late nineteenth-century Free Church’s departure from confessional Calvinism. Michael Horton looks at the self-conscious and even radical rejection of confessional Reformed theology by one of the most famous evangelists of the nineteenth century in “Finney’s Attacks on the Westminster Confession.” Finally, William S. Barker, outstanding historian and former Dean of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, considers the issue of church and state in “Lord

of Lords and King of Commoners.

The nineteenth-century historian of Westminster William Hetherington once said that the Westminster Assembly “was the most important event in the century in which it occurred . . . and has exerted, and in all probability will yet exert, a far more wide and permanent influence upon both the civil and the religious history of mankind than has generally been even imagined.” That statement, made over two centuries after the event and perhaps uncharacteristically enthusiastic and generous for a Scot talking about anything from south of the Border, may certainly be debated (I can already hear today’s historian crying “Anglo-centrism”!), but is at least indicative of the magnitude of the Assembly and its work, and its significance for the English-speaking world and beyond in successive generations. After all, Richard Baxter, a contemporary of the Assembly who held some serious divergences from the Westminster theology, himself declared that “Since the days of the Apostles there has never been a Synod of more excellent divines. . . .” Whatever the hyperbole of these estimations, the Assembly marks the highpoint of Reformed confessionalism and warrants the further study and consideration that these essays of ours intend to promote.

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## *Acknowledgments*

This first volume of the Westminster Assembly Project's essays on the Assembly has been waiting to see the light of day for more than half a decade. The General Editor wishes to express his appreciation to the authors, who have so patiently awaited its arrival, for their outstanding work. I am also appreciative of the labors of my Associate Editors, W. Duncan Rankin, Derek W.H. Thomas, Robert C. "Ric" Cannada, Jr., and Stephen Berry. Professor Rankin has been a vital part of this project from the beginning and recruited many of the contributors. Professor Thomas, who now holds the John E. Richards chair at RTS and serves with me at First Presbyterian Church, has shouldered some of the unglamorous aspects of editorial work. Dr. Cannada, now President of RTS, has continued the crucial support of the Seminary to this project and is vitally interested in its fruition. Stephen Berry, a former student and now PhD candidate at Duke did much of the initial editorial work in earlier drafts, while he was Professor Rankin's Thornwell scholar at RTS Jackson. Stephen Tindall, my intern and assistant, has painstakingly reviewed every letter and space of the final manuscript, numerous times. We are all indebted to him for his herculean labors and his liaison work with typesetters, publishers and printers in two states, three countries and two continents (not to mention his detective work in tracking down contributors world-wide). He has earned every drop of editorial attribution! Each of these men is a dear Christian friend to me and I am grateful for each of your unique contributions to this long labor.

Collectively, the whole editorial team here expresses our thanks to the Executive Committee of RTS for its ongoing encouragement and support. Many congregations and individuals have given financially toward the work of the Westminster Assembly Project, among them, James R. “Sonny” Peaster (a trustee of the Banner of Truth Trust) and A. William May (a Ruling Elder of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson) stand out. Without their gifts, we could not have brought this work to completion.

We all also wish to express our gratitude to our publisher, William Mackenzie, Managing Director of Christian Focus Publications, and our Editorial Manager, Willie Mackenzie (not to be confused with his aforementioned uncle!).

*Soli Deo Gloria*  
L.D.