

TEACHING THROUGH THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION

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I am writing this article primarily with ministers in mind. If you are not a minister, I trust that it will be a blessing to you as well, as many elders and other church leaders also may have the privilege of teaching through our Confession.

It was in our youth group in the Bible Presbyterian Church in San Bernardino, California, that I first learned about the doctrines of grace, and loved the beauty and simplicity of these truths. Jerry Galloway, who was then a student at Highland College, started it all when he brought a message to our youth group on the limited atonement, based on Romans 9. Yet when I went to Highland myself as a student several years later, my understanding was quite limited and confused.

Mrs. George Pribyl, whose husband was a Bible Presbyterian elder and the business manager of the college, was in charge of the college office. Since I had a work scholarship, I spend many hours in that office with Mrs. Pribyl. We had several theological discussions. I liked the idea of “free-will,” but she would simply smile and say, “Just wait . . . you’ll see.”

The theology teacher at Highland was the Rev. David Brown (who later was murdered while carrying out his pastoral duties). Professor Brown taught a three-semester series in theology. His main textbook, besides the Bible, was A. A. Hodge’s commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith. For three semesters we memorized the Shorter Catechism, and we memorized the whole outlines of A. A. Hodge’s book! The Lord used that “old fashioned” teaching technique in a profound way. Needless to say, Mrs. Pribyl was right. Everything fell into place.

This intense and prolonged exposure to our Reformed doctrines has been the background of my studies and orientation ever since. Throughout all my years of seminary study at Faith and postgraduate studies at Grace Theological Seminary (strongly dispensational), this doctrinal foundation has been a great blessing to me. Now, when I attend theological society meetings and hear and interact with theologians from other traditions, I appreciate more than ever the solid core of belief spelled out in our Confession. To foray out into the theological world on one’s own, without the benefit of a well-thought-out theological tradition, exposes one to tremendous risks. Many prominent Bible teachers have fallen into grievous errors, which an elementary understanding of the church’s historical standards would have warned them of.

Needless to say, I have been a firm believer in teaching the Confession ever since. It has been my privilege to teach through the Confession in several different churches and classes, in addition to my seminary teaching. A. A. Hodge’s commentary is still on my required reading list for theology classes at WRS, and I witness the same theological joy of discovery, the same firmness and confidence arising in our students that I experienced thirty years ago.

In order to help teach the Confession in churches, I have developed types notes which I distribute to the people. These notes have the text of the Confession section, an outline of the content of the section, the Scriptural support for the doctrine involved, and a brief discussion. Occasionally the catechisms give added information on the topic, in which case I often include those portions. There are several excellent harmonies of our standards, which make this task quite simple. Some of the Scriptural proofs supplied by the Westminster Assembly seem to some people to be far-fetched or not to the point. A brief discussion of the Scripture proofs is helpful. In addition, frequently there are other texts that might seem more forceful, and these I include in the notes.

Teaching is much easier and more interesting with such a handout, and the people save them. Most of these notes are now on my computer; it is fairly simple to correct them and bring them up to date. Although I've never done this, it would be helpful for someone to prepare a kind of index to our standards that people could use when they come up against common heresies, sects, or moral or ethical questions.

Church people seem to really enjoy classes in our standards. Its topics are always of great importance; our Confession is not out of date! Doctrines that were debated in the seventeenth century are still debated today. Other denominations are always trying to promote their distinctives, and nearly all of these are covered in our Confession. Preachers on TV are constantly bombarding our people with novel ideas (some not so novel!). Current issues in government and society are discussed in the Confession. Controversial subjects involving personal and family life and morality can be discussed in class before the time when they will arrive in the life of the church; members are much more easily taught without the emotionally charged atmosphere of a current situation in the church. Very seldom will your members consider a class boring! I have found that church members who have gone through the Confession in detail are much less likely to leave our churches, but rather become evangelistic when speaking to others.

Personally, I have found teaching through our Confession a blessing to my soul. This will be true for any minister. The Bible is a means of grace, and our Confession is thoroughly biblical. As you work through the various chapters, you will find that, being the teacher, you will receive a greater blessing than the rest of the class. As you meditate on the nature of God, the work of Christ, the way of salvation, your own election, conversion, and sanctification, and the practical duties God requires, you will be brought into God's presence and will receive rich encouragement to live for Christ. As practical problems arise in your life, in the lives of those around you, or in your church, you will have the tested wisdom of deeply spiritual men come readily to your mind. As younger men prepare for the ministry, you will be able to guide and help them, and to give them a standard by which to grow. Teaching through our Confession will strengthen both yourself and your church.

