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Night at the Museum: The Secret Life of an Old Confession

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The creation of a "Book of Confessions" in which the Westminster Confession of Faith is to be one among a number of confessional documents, and no longer the classic and regulative expression of Presbyterian theology, places it, to all practical intent, in a kind of theological museum, stripped of binding authority upon presbyters and regarded as irrelevant for today. [1]

I'm embarrassed to confess that while I live and work very close to the famous Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, I have never been there. Oh, sure, I've driven by it many times. I've seen the outside of it on television when they broadcast the Rose Parade. I even know that it has some classic and valuable collections of European and modern art, well worth a visit. But I've never been inside.

It may be that I'm typical of many people—we are proud of what our own towns and cities have to offer, but familiarity breeds complacency or indifference, if (perhaps) not contempt. Because we live so close to these great attractions, we boast of them to visitors…yet we never actually visit them ourselves. Alas, the venerable documents collected in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Confessions* (BOC) may themselves be subject to this same risk of complacency on the part of the locals, which is to say that for many Presbyterians, they are really more like a *museum*, where great things are preserved, displayed, and visited, than a *library*, where items are often collected precisely because they will circulate and even be consumed. Wherever such "archiving" of our BOC comes to pass the words of William Strong, quoted above, find a dismal fulfillment. But must this be the case?

Our present BOC received its basic shape in 1965-67, in the wake of a 1958 denominational merger that would eventually see the Westminster Standards both trimmed and supplemented by seven other confessional documents—the Nicene Creed, the Apostles Creed, the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Barmen Declaration, and the still-to-be-written Confession of 1967 (C-67). In recent years, our church has regularly shown interest in expanding this collection. The Brief Statement of Faith was added in 1989; in the mid-1990s, the French Confession of 1559 was briefly considered for adding to the BOC; and the Belhar Confession is currently circulating among congregations for study prior to a vote on whether to add this 1980s Reformed document from the South African struggle against apartheid.

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There are, to be sure, good reasons for wanting to add new documents. The French Confession probably records more of John Calvin's voice than any document in the BOC and has the additional virtue of capturing Reformed Christianity at an early and arguably ecumenical moment. The Belhar Confession drives us to attend to the great social and theological evil of racism, which still festers among Christ's followers in ways subtle and not-so-subtle.

Of course, at the same time there is always the danger that for each new document we add, the value of the existing documents may be diluted. One could even imagine a point when an ever-burgeoning BOC becomes simply too large and encyclopedic for *any* use, much less for effective service to presbyteries and congregations as a source of constitutional guidance in matters of faith and practice. After all, Jan Rohls's remarkable book, *Reformed Confessions*, documents at least thirty Reformed confessions and catechisms published prior to the Westminster Assembly, most of which are neither well-known nor used or remembered today.[2] Clearly, *more* is by no means always *better*.

In this essay, I want to give some attention to what might fairly be regarded as the most overlooked and underappreciated of all the documents currently in our BOC—the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC)—in order to consider how we use, or should use, *all* of our confessional documents, especially the older ones, and to ask the awkward question of whether an old document like the Westminster Larger Catechism should be retrieved and respected, or revised, or maybe even retired. Once we step back and refresh our memory of just what's in the WLC, we may be able to think anew about what we have in our current BOC, as well as about what we may or may not need. (I don't intend to resolve the question of whether the Belhar Confession ought to be added to the BOC, but because that is one of the pressing conversations our church is currently conducting, I would urge readers to bear this question in mind as we revisit some of the neglected themes to be found in the Larger Catechism.)

A retirement home for aging confessions?

I am by no means the first person to think about whether the Larger Catechism has lost its usefulness. In fact, as I hinted above, the Westminster Standards were not only supplemented back in 1967—they were also *reduced*. The adoption of C-67 and the radical makeover of the BOC were projects long in the making as outgrowths of the 1958 union of the PCUSA and the UPCNA that formed the UPCUSA. That union spawned a task force to revise the *Book of Confessions*, which at the time was essentially three documents, all from the Westminster Assembly: one confession and two catechisms.[3] But the General Assembly of 1965, repeating arguments put forward in 1959 in the minutes and essays of what would become known as the C-67 Task Force, removed the Westminster Larger Catechism from the BOC, effective as of 1967. Consequently, the Larger Catechism was withdrawn from the BOC and its constitutional authority was null for over fifteen years—until the reunion of the UPCUSA and the PCUS in 1983, when the Larger Catechism was restored to the BOC, from which the PCUS had never dropped it.

Why was the Westminster Larger Catechism retired? As stated by the Task Force and ratified by the General Assembly, the grounds for this dramatic move are initially plausible yet ultimately more than a little troubling. The reasons were set in both positive and negative terms. That is to say, the Westminster standards were set forth, on the one hand, as simply not as geographically or chronologically universal as the combined witness of the seven documents proposed to replace it, including three from the sixteenth century (where previously there had been none): the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Second Helvetic Confession, representing expressions of the Reformed faith from Scotland, Germany, and Switzerland—not just England. As asserted in the minutes of the 1965 General Assembly, Presbyterians want to see themselves "in a wider historic context than that of the British Churches of the 1640's."[4] Edward A. Dowey, Jr., chair of the C-67 committee and professor of Christian doctrine at Princeton from 1957 until 1988, put it mordantly: "The Westminster Confession, standing alone, is not modern enough to guide the present, nor is it ancient enough to represent the past."[5]

It's worth recalling that while the three newly-included Reformation confessions were indisputably among the most important and revered writings of their day, they were not the only contenders for inclusion in the late 1950s. Some would have preferred the Belgic Confession of 1561, which is still part of the constitution of the Christian Reformed Church; others wanted even then to include the French Confession of 1559; and still others expressed a preference for Calvin's Geneva Catechism, which dates from the 1540s.[6] But just as tastes and preferences for Reformed confessions varied, so too did the underlying motives. While some welcomed the new BOC for its chronological and geographical inclusiveness, others evidently regarded it more as a means of diluting and thus de-centering the authority and tenor of the Westminster documents.[7]

It is difficult not to regard the rejection of the Larger Catechism as an indictment of the Westminster

standards in general, even though many of those involved insisted that they admired the Westminster divines and their achievement.[8] Nonetheless, it's clear that Westminster, and the Larger Catechism in particular, were viewed with some degree of restlessness, to say the least. The report of the C-67 committee explained the excision of the WLC with this paragraph:

> The Westminster Confession and Shorter Catechism. The proposal of the Committee is to retain these two as they presently stand in the Constitution, and allow the Larger Catechism to drop out. While the latter was thought of very highly by its authors, it has rarely recommended itself to general use. It is in bulk larger than the Westminster Confession itself, and hence is quite unwieldy as a catechetical device. While it does contain concrete ethical admonitions, it tends to be excessively legalistic and to make an unconscionably detailed use of the proof text method of citing Scripture. Substantively, it adds nothing to the Westminster Confession and is not likely in the future to achieve a place comparable to that already held by the Shorter Catechism as the ideal companion document for the Confession.[9]

The passive tone here ("allow," "has rarely recommended itself") and tendentious adjectives ("excessively legalistic," "unconscionably detailed") do not suggest that the document really received a fair trial —particularly if one considers that the "proof text" citations for both Catechisms were not originally part of these works as the Westminster Assembly composed them but were added afterwards, at the insistence of the English Parliament![10] Clearly, many Presbyterians of the fifties and sixties—including the clergy and faculty on the Special Committee—were convinced that they did not like the Westminster Larger Catechism in particular, on account of its use of the Bible, its supposed legalism and preoccupation with casuistry, its account of predestination, on top of which it was deemed simply too long and hence "unwieldy."[11]

In fact, while many of these complaints do reflect arguably "modern" concerns, neglect of the Larger Catechism on account of its length is nothing new. Surveying its relative unpopularity not just in the twentieth century but over the course of its entire 350-year history, Chad van Dixhoorn reported a few years ago that while he has found two dozen or more commentaries or study guides on the Shorter Catechism since its first appearance, on the Larger Catechism he has found only one.[12] So the length of the Larger Catechism may truly have been counterproductive, given the obvious availability of the Shorter Catechism, but what about the other complaints? Is it fair to dismiss the Larger Catechism for legalism, or scholasticism, or proof-texting—or for being concerned for traditional theological topics such as predestination or covenant theology?[13] (After all, it's hard to imagine that any such charge would apply to only *one* of the Westminster standards!) In much of what follows here, I will offer some grounds for reexamining the dismissive attitudes leveled against Westminster by reviewing a sample of some of the classic—or, perhaps, clichéd—themes in the Westminster Larger Catechism, reading it in conjunction with the other Westminster documents in order to make a case for the vitality and enduring relevance of this much maligned catechism.

Been there, seen that? Four exhibits from the Hall of Reformed Clichés

Exhibit #1: *Soli Deo Gloria* . . . and all that.

If a Presbyterian knows anything at all about the Westminster Confession (WCF) and its companion pieces, it's all but certain that it will be at least a dim recollection of having heard, somewhere, those classic lines from the Shorter Catechism:

> Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?
> A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Not surprisingly, the Larger Catechism is nearly identical at this point, because the Shorter Catechism was itself produced subsequently, in part as a summary and abridgement of the Larger.[14]

> Q.1. What is the chief *and highest* end of man?
> A. Man's chief *and highest* end is to glorify God, and *fully* to enjoy him forever.

Granting (and then setting aside!) that modern stylists will almost certainly prefer the more direct prose of the Shorter Catechism, what is really of interest to us here is that this classic and memorable opening may also represent, for many, a Reformed cliché, insofar as it illustrates the Calvinist penchant to make constant reference to God's *glory*. Why, one might ask, does the all-powerful Deity need glory? Is God vain?

We are not helped by the fact that *glory* has become one of those words that you hardly ever hear except in church. I can recall a Bible study on Ephesians 1, some years ago, when we got to verse 12, where Paul says we are to live "for the praise of God's glory." One of the members of the group raised exactly the question I would expect, asking with some exasperation, "What's *that* supposed to mean?" For him, the word meant next to nothing. But why shouldn't it? When, outside of church, do you hear or use *glory*? People all the time say, "Have a *nice* day," but suppose you were to start saying, "Have a *glorious* day!" People might look at you strangely and move slowly away.

I also recall a report from my daughter when she was in high school and classes resumed in the fall. Her U.S. History teacher asked by way of review, "Who can name the three G's of the Age of Exploration?" They were, of course, God, glory, and gold—three things that moved Europeans to explore the western hemisphere. And that's how we use the term *glory*, if we use it at all: You get glory if you discover America, or if you conquer some foreign land. We don't have quite those opportunities today, however, so we might ascribe glory to movie stars or sports heroes, or sometimes to soldiers or politicians. Glory is what celebrities often like to bask in, but all too often is mixed of one part achievement and nine parts marketing and self-promotion.

Nonetheless, promoting God's glory *is* fittingly regarded as a hallmark of the Reformed tradition. There are few passages that illustrate this point as poignantly and as concisely as John Calvin did in his angry rebuke to Cardinal Sadoleto's attempt in 1538 to woo the Genevans back to Roman Catholicism. Reacting against Sadoleto's fearmongering about salvation, Calvin retorted that "it is not very sound theology to confine a man's thoughts so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive of his existence, *zeal* to illustrate the glory of God. For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves."[15] Among American evangelicals, this may be a new thought: that God's glory is more important than our own personal salvation—even as the gospel itself is first and foremost about God, not about us.

Yet it remains understandable why some would find such a statement hard to embrace, just as many predecessors to the Larger Catechism led not with God's glory but with the more existentially appealing accent on salvation.[16] So too, in our own day, it is understandable why people might be suspicious of a God who insists on his own *glory*, of all things, as if the divine ego needed to be stroked in the way so many vain mortals need accolades and applause.

This is where the Westminster Confession and its Catechisms can offer a fine corrective on the subject of God's glory. All it takes is a little attention to the *contexts* in which the Westminster divines expound the glory of God—a term that occurs, significantly, over eighty times in the Westminster standards.[17] Accordingly, it turns out that God's glory has nothing at all to do with shallow self-promotion. Instead, God's glory is essentially a kind of shorthand for God's many excellences and for God's extraordinary self-giving. In the Confession, then, God's glory is linked early on to his self-sufficiency as the source of his own glory and life as well as the source from which all creatures possess life and being, so that it is they who exist more to manifest God's glory than to contribute to it in any real sense. All this is compacted in WCF 6.012, but the corresponding exposition in WLC further juxtaposes God's infinite glory with God's supreme wisdom, justice, mercy, grace, and truth (7.117). Both the Confession and the Larger Catechism go on to describe all the goodness of creation, providence, and redemption as additional ways that God's glory is diversely manifested in his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy (6.022, 6.024; 7.122-23, 7.128-29).

But the Larger Catechism also underscores what the Confession has to say about the intrinsic connection between God's glory and human good (e.g., 7.155, 7.243). In other words, God is not a *narcissist* but a *philanthropist*: a lover of mortals and a better friend to them than they are to themselves. Thus, in Q.83, even in this life we enjoy a kind of "communion in glory" with Christ that is manifested in spectacular ways: we "enjoy the sense of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, and hope of glory" (7.193). Similarly, when Q.184 instructs us to pray "for all things tending to the glory of God," it immediately cites three prime examples: "the welfare of the church" and "our own or others' good."

There are many other references to God's glory in the Confession and Larger Catechism, but in brief, God's glory always reflects God's character and intentions, especially that God is *good*—really, truly good in ways that boggle the mind!—and that God is the giver of life as well as its restorer. To glorify God, then, is not to *add* something to God or to give God something that he needs from us. Instead, to glorify God is simply to *tell the truth* about God as our life-giver and redeemer. To tell and live this truth about God as good, gracious, and glorious is the heart of the gospel. It is the one true calling of mortal creatures: our hope, our greatest joy, our highest pleasure, and the spontaneous response of anyone who glimpses God's glory as set forth *for us* in Jesus Christ. And when you have such a glimpse of the big picture of God's glory and our graced participation in it, how could that glory be a cliché?

Exhibit #2: Enjoying God? What kind of fun is that?

It is possible, of course, that "enjoying God" is not exactly a cliché of the Reformed tradition, but it seems fair to observe that it is the ingredient in the Larger Catechism's opening that is almost certainly the least expected. It commands attention, yet it is seldom analyzed. And if the phrase is repeated often enough without any sure explanation, it also runs the risk of becoming little more than an elegant cipher. After all, when they ponder the fact that the Westminster standards are essentially the product of a Puritan

mindset, many would wonder, *Were the Puritans capable of enjoying anything?* It is typical in America to use *puritanical* as a synonym for all those impulses that are overly pious, prudish, austere, authoritarian, judgmental, intolerant—in short, descriptive of a real killjoy.

So the presence of *enjoying* God at the outset of both catechisms may well be unexpected and enigmatic. But equally unexpected is the frequency with which this and related terms recur in the Westminster documents—roughly twice as often as the rest of the Book of Confessions taken as a whole.[18] One might conclude that these Puritan Presbyterians were rather taken with this matter of joy and enjoyment!

To be sure, they were. And there were reasons for their interest in this theme. One arose from the Bible itself, which is full of references to the *joy* of the Lord—something we do not always link as directly as we should to the experience of *enjoyment*. Remarkably, in the Larger Catechism itself, the leading "proof text" for this phrase is actually Psalm 73:24-28, which includes these lines: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." These are words that proclaim God as the heart's desire, both here and hereafter, and describe God as the only thing that can satisfy us.[19]

A parallel reason, however, more distant but in all likelihood nearly as important, stems from one of the ancestors of the Reformed tradition—St. Augustine. More than a millennium before the Protestant Reformation, Augustine pondered what real joy was and where the heart's true delight could be found. He left a hugely influential legacy not only for Roman Catholicism but also for the Protestant Reformers, who tended to regard Augustine as the most important of the church fathers because he seemed to bear witness to the key insights of the Reformation. In his *Confessions*, you can read of Augustine's poignant but wandering search for love and beauty, and for joy and delight. Later, in *The City of God*, Augustine would theorize that the entire history of human greed and wretchedness may be explained by a failure to realize just what we were designed for—a failure to love the right things in the right way. For Augustine, we can love a thing in two different ways: either as a means to an end, or as an end in itself. To love something as a means is to *use* it; to love something as an end in itself is to *enjoy* it.[20] We all know how hurtful it is to feel used by someone rather than loved, but Augustine's point was that, ultimately, only *God* is an object large enough and beautiful enough to satisfy the eternal longings of the human heart. As he wrote in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord! Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Even a spouse, or a parent, or a child—however much we love and cherish them—is a poor substitute for God, and we can horribly distort God's intentions for us and for the world if we put these people, or any other thing, in the place of God and love them as the ultimate end for which we were made.

There are surely echoes of Augustine to be heard behind Q.1 of the Westminster catechisms, which insist so wonderfully that joy and enjoyment are indeed meant to be at the center of our lives—even as they insist that we get our loves and our enjoyment straight! Or, as Calvin put it once again, "We are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves." The theme of joy and enjoyment is woven throughout the Larger Catechism and highlights such benefits and privileges as God's special care for us alongside the enjoyment of the saints' own communion and the blessings of grace, salvation, and the ministry of the gospel (Q.63). God's providence is indeed something to be enjoyed, which is why Q.193 extends the notion of enjoyment also to all the daily needs that God supplies—tangible things, like the daily bread for which we pray on our own behalf and that of others. The WLC speaks of a "holy use" of such mundane things—a use that is also described as oriented toward our comfort in this life.

Of course, there is a higher joy and enjoyment in spiritual things. We have already cited Q.83, which identifies "communion in glory with Christ" as something that the members of the invisible church *enjoy* not just in the life to come but even now, in this life, and which includes "the sense of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, and hope of glory." But the expectation of joy and enjoyment is also directed at the life to come, particularly in Q.86 and Q. 90. And if God takes pride of place among all things that we might enjoy in this life and the next, it simply calls us back to where we began: that God is the heart's only real desire, and only God can save and satisfy.

Exhibit #3: Covenant — just another Reformed buzzword?

Anyone who hangs around the PC(USA) long enough will quickly notice that certain words seem to crop up everywhere. One of these words is *covenant*. But what does it mean? Does anybody know, or is it just a decorative slogan? I regularly teach a class for Presbyterian seminarians on our *Book of Confessions* in which the final assignment is to prepare a personal statement of faith of the sort that will be required by most presbyteries for their final certification of readiness (as per G-14.0482). It's common for me to find *covenant* lightly sprinkled over such statements in such terms as

covenant relationship, covenant community, covenant history, covenant signs, etc. But what does this modifier really add to such statements? It's hard to tell, even as it's also often hard to tell if the writers of such statements know what they meant when they added the word. Usually, if I strike the word with my blue pencil, nothing significant is lost. *Covenant* thus risks becoming a buzzword, Presbyterian jargon, devoid of context or theology.

Ironically, the traditional Reformed notion of covenant is itself not only neglected but also misperceived. As illustrated in the Westminster Confession and the Larger Catechism, Reformed theologians discerned principally two covenants in the Bible—a *covenant of works*, given to Adam and Eve and requiring of them "perfect and personal obedience" to their Creator; and a *covenant of grace*, also given to Adam and Eve immediately after they breached the covenant of works through their sinful disobedience. In other words, the covenant of grace begins in Genesis 3, not Matthew 1! In that covenant of grace, God brings salvation and redemption to sinners by his sheer love and mercy, beginning with Adam and Eve.[21] Among the many implications of Reformed exegesis at this point, then, is that there is effectively only *one* covenant that binds together all the people of God of both the Old Testament and the New (even if the administration differs at various points in salvation history), and that salvation by *grace* has always been the rule, not salvation by works of the law.

Those two points are not always well known. One primer of Presbyterian doctrine asserts that "covenant theology" speaks of "the time before Jesus Christ as under a 'covenant of works' and the time after Christ as a 'covenant of grace,'" for "Christ…ushered in the covenant of grace."[22] This is an old notion—that the Old Testament represents the covenant of works and the New Testament, the covenant of grace—but it could scarcely be less Reformed! (Readers who want to trace the real Reformed position back to Calvin are advised to consult his commentary on the new covenant in Jeremiah.[23]) The framers of C-67 were also not all that taken with covenant theology in its classic expression. Though the term does appear four times in C-67 (as opposed to over fifty occurrences in our Westminster documents, not counting notes), Edward Dowey publicly asserted that the C-67 committee thought that "covenant . . . couldn't be adequately recovered," which is part of why *reconciliation* became the central theme instead.[24] As noted above, Dowey would go on to express his dissatisfaction with Westminster's "predestinarian, two-covenant system of theology" (which he oddly glossed as a "ponderous description"), for which C-67 would be an effective antidote.[25]

Unfortunately, what gets swept aside in the debates over the alleged scholasticism of Westminster's covenant theology is a good deal of the actual content of that theology. The essence of covenant, as the Westminster Confession understands it, could arguably be paraphrased as *compassion*. Here is my paraphrase of 6.037: "The distance between God and us is so great, that although we owe God obedience as our Creator, we could never have any enjoyment of God, much less blessing or reward, unless God voluntarily condescended to us, which is what God does by means of a covenant." The Larger Catechism in Q.30 amplifies this even a bit further (again, slightly paraphrased): "God does not leave us to perish in the sin and misery into which we fell by violating the covenant of works, but out of his sheer love and mercy delivers his elect and saves them by his covenant of grace."[26] In both texts, a major ingredient of the exposition of covenant is God's sovereignty and persistence, but not as cold and abstract attributes. Rather, what we see here is God portrayed as very much the "hound of heaven," whose compassion for sinners is as boundless as his persistence is endless. God's covenant love, truly, is the love that will not let us go.

It is ironic, then, that Westminster should be criticized for its covenant theology, when that very theology undergirds two insights that almost everyone who preferred C-67 would have regarded as among the most moving and significant parts of the gospel: that *there is but one covenant under which all stand in every age*, condemned one and all for sin, yet rescued by grace; and that *the God who rescues us is truly the bridge-builder*, who seeks us even when we hide and in places where we often would not be found. Cliché? Or good news?

Exhibit #4: Holiness — Personal morality is fine, but did they care about injustice?

As we have seen more than once, Westminster has often been described as legalistic, as if the case were proved by allegations that it reads more like "a constitutional than a confessional document" on account of "its precise phrasing, its cumbrous involutions and repetitions, the multiplications of prepositions and qualifying clauses," as if it were "a legal contract."[27] More damning still, perhaps, is the charge that the Westminster Confession is individualistic:

> The Confession tends to view the drama of redemption as one that is played out between God and the individual. The social aspect of the drama is formally recognized—in the doctrines of the covenant, the church, and the communion of saints—but its significance is not fully realized and it is not integrated into the picture as a whole. It is the individual who occupies the stage for most of the

time; rarely do we catch a glimpse of his "neighbor" —this Biblical word is absent from the Confession.[28]

Were the Presbyterians of Westminster "puritanical" in *this* despicable sense as well, concerned only for their own salvation and not so much moral as just moralistic? Did they ever take seriously the injustices suffered by others, including perhaps their neighbors?

In the context of this charge of legalism, one of the passages of the Larger Catechism that seems to grate on readers is the extremely long section on the Ten Commandments, which treats each commandment in two ways: by asking what is forbidden, then what is enjoined. The idea here is that it's not enough merely to avoid certain forbidden actions; rather, because these divine precepts aim at the holistic formation of our character, every sin that is forbidden implies an equally obligatory duty, and vice versa. No doubt about it, this procedure, along with Westminster's taste for precision and detail, makes for lengthy reading! But is it really legalistic or individualistic?

Here is where, in my own reading, I have been scandalized by those who find the section on the Ten Commandments scandalous, because where they find scholasticism and legalism, I keep finding conviction, social consciousness, tangible love for one's neighbor, and a concern for justice in state and marketplace. The eighth commandment, "You shall not steal," is an excellent case in point. How do you suppose they interpreted this command? As a defense of (their own) private property? Hardly. If the writer cited above failed to find "neighbor" in the Westminster Confession, one wonders why he did not go looking for it in the Westminster catechisms, where it abounds—and why, as a member of the C-67 committee, he was so willing to delete the Larger Catechism.

In reviewing the remarkable content of the Larger Catechism on the eighth commandment, it is necessary to quote Q.141 and Q.142 at length (again, slightly paraphrased and modernized):

> The duties required in the Eighth Commandment are: truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce…; rendering to everyone his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained…; giving and lending freely, according to our abilities and the needs of others; moderation of our judgments, wills, and affections concerning worldly goods; a provident care and study to get, keep, use, and dispose of those things which are necessary and convenient for sustaining our nature and suitable to our condition; a lawful calling, and diligence in it; frugality; avoiding unnecessary lawsuits…; and an endeavor by all just and lawful means to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own.
>
> The sins forbidden in the Eighth Commandment besides the neglect of duties required are: theft, robbery, kidnapping, and receiving anything stolen; fraud, false weights and measures, removing landmarks, injustice and unfaithfulness in contracts…; oppression, extortion, usury, bribery, vexatious lawsuits; engrossing commodities to enhance the price, unlawful callings, and all other unjust ways of taking or withholding from our neighbor what belongs to him; covetousness, inordinate affection for worldly goods, and a distrustful and distracting preoccupation with getting, keeping, and using them; envying others' prosperity; as likewise idleness, prodigality, wasteful gaming, and all other ways whereby we squander our own outward estate; and defrauding ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God has given us.

There are so many pertinent, trenchant, and relevant values in these two questions that one cannot hope to comment on but a few! But look again at some of their concerns, and ask if the indictments are puritanical and self-serving, or rather outward looking and passionate about justice. In a consumerist culture, is there reason to urge "moderation of the affections" for worldly goods? In a litigious society, is there reason to decry "unnecessary lawsuits"? Is "justice in contracts and commerce" ever a concern today? Or have we outgrown theft, fraud, and bribery, not to mention "engrossing commodities to enhance the price" (think of Wall Street and the mortgage crisis)? What I have paraphrased as kidnapping is, in the original, "man-stealing," which certainly applies to human trafficking today. The same could be said for "restitution of goods," which itself demands that we give a fair hearing to those who think that reparations for slavery in the United States is, in fact, also a Presbyterian cause. Finally, there is the question of "wasteful gaming." Does anyone really believe state lotteries are an unalloyed blessing to the lives of the poor and needy? Casinos? Were we Presbyterians asleep when these items were on the ballot?

There are wonderful things in C-67, as well as in Barmen and the Brief Statement of Faith, some of them not to be found in the Westminster standards. Yet none of these 20th-century statements offer anything like this amazing, inspiring, and intimidating section in the Larger Catechism, which prods us not to withdraw into a Christian cocoon but to engage with the world around us and to oppose its evils. And it does so not on behalf of our own self-interest or as an expression of a pragmatic "Protestant ethic," but for the wholly

disinterested cause of God's glory—and *neighbor's* good, too, for a careful reading of these paragraphs won't miss that "furthering wealth" is directed first to the "outward estate of others," and only then our own. Clearly, the Westminster Larger Catechism confronts us with the cliché of legalism or formalism only if we have gone there to find it. Far better, however, that we should visit this catechism in search of exhortation, wherein we may find not only an exercise in extreme humility but also a call to emulate these, our forebears.

"They only come out at night." The WLC's surprising spirituality.

As hinted earlier, it would be easy to read the Larger Catechism and find it intimidating for its exacting attention to the details of the Christian life. Perhaps we should stay away from the Westminster documents altogether, lest we encounter giants there and become as grasshoppers in our own eyes. But this too would be a misconstrual of these documents. There are many surprises in the Westminster standards that are perfectly capable of correcting misimpressions of legalism or rigorism or, perhaps more to the point, lack of pastoral sensitivity to the human weaknesses that typically fill our pews today. Let me call your attention to two such surprises.

Surprise #1: The myth of legalism *vs.* the realistic piety of Puritan Presbyterians.

If the Westminster documents have struck some as legalistic, a good part of the reason surely lies with the fact that the law does get so much attention—as overwhelmingly illustrated by the long section in the Larger Catechism on the Ten Commandments. But the question that arises is this: does the mere fact of *paying attention* to the laws of God as found in Scripture make one a legalist?

The Reformed tradition would answer that question with a quick *no*, however much charges of legalism may be thrown around in the PC(USA) today during our arguments over doctrine, polity, and practice. Indeed, if there is a surprise to be registered here, it ought to be surprise at how Presbyterians have forgotten one of the most distinctive aspects of Calvin's theology—namely, his esteem for the divine law *not at all* as a means of justification, but nonetheless as a godly guide for Christian behavior.

This is the doctrine that is known as the "third use" of the law. In the sixteenth century, the law was generally agreed to have at least two uses: first, to restrain sinners from behaving even worse by threatening them with fear of punishment; second, to expose our inability to fulfill the law and so drive us in despair to Christ and his mercy. These were known, respectively, as the "civil" and the "evangelical" uses of the law. Calvin argued that, rightly understood, the law had yet a third use for Christians: as a guide for behavior.[29] This third use of the law was a point of tension between early Reformed theologians and their Lutheran counterparts, for one of Luther's frequent refrains was "Don't make Christ into a new Moses!" Later Lutherans came to terms with the third use of the law, perhaps somewhat begrudgingly, but Calvin and his Reformed colleagues always tended to prize the law in at least one way that early Lutherans did not.

The third use of the law is explicitly part of the Westminster Confession, which describes the law as "a rule of life" for Christians that informs them "of the will of God and their duty" and "directs…them to walk accordingly" (6.106). Similarly, Q.97 of the Larger Catechism writes that while Christians are "delivered from the moral law as a covenant of works" so that "they are neither justified nor condemned" by it, there remains for Christians this "special use," namely, "to show them how much they are bound to Christ" for having fulfilled the law and endured its curse on their behalf, and that in turn ought to provoke Christians to greater thankfulness and to a more careful discipleship.

What's crucial to note in both these contexts is that the law may well be a guide for Christians, but there is never anything but horror expressed at the notion that the law can ever be allowed to justify us—or to condemn us! Instead, the law will inevitably expose our shortcomings, just as it does for all sinners, and in this way, where it once drove us to Christ for justification, it now *binds* us to Christ (or reminds us of how we are *already* bound to Christ). The net result is not works-righteousness. Rather, the result is an increase in our gratitude. No less than their Lutheran counterparts, advocates of the Reformed tradition never forgot that the law, wrongly used, is a terror to the unregenerate conscience (WLC Q.153). In brief, then, the law is actually suffused with grace for Christians, which gives us every reason to seek within it not fear or a rebuke but an encounter with the grace of the living Christ, our advocate, *and* a depiction of the godly character that the Holy Spirit is determined to form within us.

Surprise #2: The covenant of grace & our feet of clay.

If these "theoretical" statements about the law leave you unconvinced of the character of the Westminster standards as fundamentally gracious, not legalistic, let's turn to a different consideration—of how the Westminster divines regarded the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and how they prayed.

In Q.172 of the Larger Catechism, the poignant question is asked as to whether someone who doubts of being in Christ, or doubts about having duly prepared to receive this sacrament, may or should partake of the Lord's Supper. Before reading the answer to this question, one should pause to recall that the Reformed tradition has traditionally worried very much about receiving the Lord's Supper "worthily," in accordance with their reading of 1 Cor. 11:27-29:

> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.

Consequently, Reformed Christians were known for "fencing the table," that is, excluding those who were manifestly unworthy or, perhaps, who had insufficiently examined their lives. For many centuries, Presbyterian churches issued communion tokens to those who had declared their intention to partake of the sacrament and whose sincerity had been examined; not surprisingly, on the backs of many of these tokens was the phrase, "Let a man examine himself."

It comes as at least a modest surprise, then, that it was precisely this concern to *exclude* "unworthy persons from the sacrament of the Lords Supper" that provoked the responses that appear now as Q.172 and Q. 173.[30] The latter question does state that those who are ignorant or living lives of open scandal should be barred, pending their instruction or reformation. But it is the former question that displays such a disarming gentleness. First of all, the answer readily admits that "one who doubts of being in Christ or of due preparation" for the sacrament may indeed still have "true interest in Christ" —that is, a claim to participate or share in Christ—if that person is aware of his or her doubts yet is also "unfeignedly desirous to be found in Christ and to depart from iniquity." In other words, while it's a very good thing for Christians to be consciously aware and confident that they have faith in Christ, the Westminster divines acknowledged that such assurance is not always present in people who nonetheless truly do belong to Christ. So the answer goes on to insist that because "this sacrament is appointed for the relief *even of weak and doubting Christians*," those who doubt should "bewail" their unbelief and labor to have their doubts resolved—and, in this mode, doubting Christians "may and *ought* to come to the Lord's Supper," so that they may be "further strengthened."

Were they sincere in this gentleness? If further proof were required, one need only glance at the proof texts that were chosen to support the phrase about "relief for the weak." They include some of the tenderest words in the entire Bible, ranging from Isaiah 40:11 ("he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom") to a litany of lines from Matthew 11:28 ("Come to me, all you that are weary…"), 12:20 ("He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick…"), and 26:28 ("this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins").

The next-to-last question in the Larger Catechism is Q.195, and it offers us a fitting place to conclude our survey. The question is the tenth of eleven questions that teach prayer by teaching about the Lord's Prayer. It asks, specifically, about the meaning of the sixth petition, "and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The answer begins by carefully recognizing that "the most wise, righteous, and gracious God, for…holy and just ends, may so order things that we may be assaulted, foiled, and for a time led captive by temptations." This is a mystery, that our gracious God would allow his saints not only to be tempted, but even to be *held captive* by temptation! The Larger Catechism, wisely enough, does not attempt to explain the ways of God here, but it does recognize this excruciating reality of the Christian life.

The Larger Catechism also does not pretend that temptation is merely a "pre-conversion" reality. Rather, it speaks of real Christians, and they are really being tempted: "Even after the pardon of our sins,…we are not only [liable] to be tempted and…to expose ourselves unto temptations, but also of ourselves unable and unwilling to resist them [or] to recover out of them and improve them, and worthy to be left under the power of them." Christians appear here in a rather unflattering but sober light: not only are we often tempted, we also set ourselves up; we do not resist these temptations but even enjoy them!

The only antidote for temptation is prayer, just as the Lord Jesus taught us. But the Larger Catechism anticipates three possible scenarios for prayers in time of temptation. Accordingly, when we pray the sixth petition, we are in the best case praying "that God would so overrule the world and all in it, subdue the flesh, and restrain Satan, order all things, bestow and bless all means of grace, and quicken us to watchfulness in the use of them, that we and all his people may…be *kept from being tempted* to sin." Would that this form of the prayer were always granted, that we were by God's providence kept from temptation altogether! But the Westminster divines knew of other, less happy scenarios. Hence, this petition is also a prayer for when we are tempted, "that by his Spirit we may be powerfully supported and *enabled to stand* in the hour of

temptation." There is, of course, a third scenario—the worst case. But even here, the Lord's Prayer is still a prayer for us when we have fallen into sin, that we may be "*raised again and recovered* out of it," so that "our sanctification and salvation may be perfected, Satan trodden under our feet, and we fully freed from sin, temptation, and all evil forever." Saints can be tempted. Saints sin. The Larger Catechism looks to the Christian life not as we might wish it were, free from temptation and sin, but as it really is: a pilgrimage that walks by faith, not sight.

After the Museum: Some Concluding Thoughts

In my experience, just about any visit to a museum leaves you tired but often newly stretched, informed, and even exhilarated, as well as amazed at how much is still left to see and read. The same is true here. The burden of this essay has been to argue that, happily, neither the Westminster Confession nor the Larger Catechism in particular lives up to the negative publicity that so often has surrounded them as our original constitutional documents. Instead, they are vastly more interesting, and well worth the time it takes to visit them. While they can be accused of legalism and scholasticism, or coldness and obscurity, charges like these ultimately seem superficial and contrived—and, as we have seen, arguably generated by less than objective readings and agendas. It is understandable, politically, that the need for a new confession will be perceived more acutely if the inadequacies of the old confessions are placed in the harshest possible light. But there is a world of difference between close scrutiny and a trial by innuendo, and in 1965-67, the Larger Catechism seems to have been the victim of the latter.

To be sure, there is a century's remove between Westminster and the sixteenth century of John Calvin, and a much larger gap from Westminster to our own day. Yet, as we have seen, many of the contrasts that have been alleged—in matters of doctrine, or morals, or social awareness, or even tone—are more exaggerated than true to their subject. There remains a solidarity that we could recover with our forebears at Westminster that could be both humbling and energizing to us and our congregations, were we but to consider the wisdom of the past, taking with us the ears to hear.

It is, in any case, a perplexing and even risky prospect when a church adopts a new confession on the grounds that the old one is obsolete or inadequate. It is even riskier when the church adopts a whole package of new and old confessions, hoping this new spread of confessions will guide the church in ways that the old one did not. No confession can guide the church if (whether old or new) it is never consulted and thus never functions, for all practical purposes, as an authority from which we actually learn. This is one lesson of the displacement of the Larger Catechism by C-67, but it also bears on our current consideration of the Belhar Confession.

Experience shows, I think, that the most recent confessional document will always upstage earlier documents. But more worrisome still is that an apathetic failure to guard our historical legacy will upstage everything. These are not just my own fears. To his credit, Edward Dowey himself said as much on at least one occasion. "If we ignore our new confession in the way we did the old one," he worried aloud, "not much will happen."[31] Indeed, a quarter of a century later, he seems to have concluded that ignoring its tradition is something the Presbyterian church has done all too well. Writing in review of the massive, seven-volume Lilly-funded study, "The Presbyterian Presence," Dowey takes to task, at length and with insight, "an American Presbyterianism ignorant of its own roots." In particular, he excoriates the tendentious use of C-67 and "the virtual leave-taking of Reformed confessionalism" that he finds present in "the shallowly conceived second volume titled *The Confessional Mosaic*."

> The "mosaic" appeared, [the editors] say, in the 1967 *Book of Confessions* as a pluralistic relativizing of the church's confession. For them, following a mistaken nod from L. A. Loetscher, the fundamentalist aberration of the years 1910-1926 is normative. Three other writers take the 1967 utterance, "No one type of confession is exclusively valid, no one statement is irreformable," as a modern premise for a new "multiconfessionalism," as if they had never heard of the sixteenth century's *Sola Scriptura*, or that the ultra-Westminsterite Charles Hodge called the Second Helvetic Confession "probably the most authoritative" Reformed confession.[32]

Dowey's harsh critique registers a sense of betrayal of his hopes for what C-67 was meant to accomplish, but his words also lend credibility to his earlier assertion of his real respect for Westminster. However much he felt the church's confession needed the updating represented by C-67, he was equally anxious lest the church forget its deepest Reformation legacy, much less the Scriptures themselves.

William Strong may have been all too much of a prophet when he worried that the changes adopted in 1965 would relegate the Westminster Confession—and all our confessional documents, really—to a museum. Yet if Strong's metaphor arose from his pessimism, it

may yet be retrofitted for more optimistic uses. A museum, after all, is where we go to *muse*: to ponder and reflect on things past, present, and future, and to find a quiet place where we keep things too important to forget or discard—things that we preserve and publicize precisely because we believe that by doing so, we shape ourselves and keep these memories alive and active for the generations to come. Our church needs just such a living memory now, perhaps more than ever.

1. William Strong, third point of the formal protest he filed against the action of the 177th General Assembly (1965) at the conclusion of its vote to approve the report of the Special Committee on a Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith, thus sending C-67 to the "special committee of fifteen" that would eventually commend it (with modifications) to presbyteries for the vote that would replace the Westminster standards with an expanded Book of Confessions; as reported in *Minutes of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Part I: Journal* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly, 1965), p. 455. (This and similar volumes will hereafter be cited simply as *Minutes* and identified by church and year.)
2. Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), pp. 9-28. This diversity and quantity of confessions reflects the multiple origins of Reformed Christianity, which, while it typically gives a special place to the prolific writings and influence of John Calvin, does not properly regard him or any other single figure as the "founder" of the Reformed church(es). Rather, "Reformed" Christianity represents the gradual coalescence of many churches and leaders in Europe, most of whom admired Luther but found reason to dissent from Lutherans on important matters.
3. This is not to assert that the Westminster documents had never been revised for their American context. Significant changes to the text and doctrinal content were introduced in 1790 and in 1903, and separate revisions to the sections on marriage and divorce were introduced by the northern and southern churches in the 1950s.
4. See *Minutes of the UPCUSA* (1965), Part 1, p. 308; this passage originally appeared in the *Minutes* of 1959, Part I, pp. 268-69. Some elements of the following paragraphs draw on my essay, "A Conversation with the Reformation Confessions," in *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Joseph D. Small (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2005), pp. 33-50.
5. Dowey's remark is on p. 318 of his article ("Confessions of the Church: Types and Functions") that was incorporated into the *Minutes of the UPCUSA* (1965), Part I, pp. 315-18. As chair of the C-67 committee (officially known as the Special Committee on a Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith), he was probably responsible for much of the larger report in these minutes.
6. A few details of these alternative considerations are found in John Wilkinson, "On Being a Confessional Church," a presentation to the General Assembly Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church (dated February 2003), pp. 4-8; online at www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/ resources/wilkinson0203.pdf
7. See John Wilkinson, "The Making of the Confession of 1967," *Church and Society* 92/5 (May-June 2002), pp. 27-29.
8. Dowey reiterated this point in an August 2000 interview with John Wilkinson. See Kenneth John Wilkinson, Jr., "The Confession of 1967: Presbyterians and the Politics of Reconciliation" (PhD diss., Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary / Northwestern University, 2001), p. 40n; this extremely helpful dissertation will hereafter be cited as "Politics of Reconciliation."
9. *Minutes of the UPCUSA* (1965), Part 1, p. 322.
10. Parliament had previously made the same sort of demand for Scripture proofs to accompany the Confession, and the Assembly had been similarly reluctant to comply then as well — not merely because the task was onerous, but also because the Westminster divines were as aware then as we are now that proof texts can be abused. Some members of the Assembly thought a word of caution should be inserted to guide the reader in understanding how the proofs applied, but the suggestion was dismissed lest the work be further delayed. For a concise account of the debate over Scripture proofs (with full details of the original correspondence), see John R. Bower, *The Larger Catechism: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Principal Documents of the Westminster Assembly; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2010), pp. 42-45.
11. Westminster's legalism and casuistry are but two of Special Committee member George S. Hendry's many complaints in his curiously-timed book, *The Westminster Confession for Today: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Richmond: John Knox, 1960), pp. 14-15 — curious, because one gets the impression that he was not at all enthusiastic about the prospects for the theology of Westminster for today (the title of his book notwithstanding!), and because his own participation on the Special Committee made him an apologist for the eventual Confession of 1967. For other contemporary criticisms of Westminster, see Wilkinson, "Politics of Reconciliation," pp. 41, 53-57, 81.
12. Namely, Thomas Ridgely's lectures on the Larger Catechism, which appeared 1731-33; see Chad B. van Dixhoorn, "The Making of the Westminster Larger Catechism," *Reformation & Revival* 10/2 (Spring 2001): 97.
13. Many of these concerns were voiced by Dowey in his unofficial exposition of C-67 and the "new" Book of Confessions: Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *A Commentary on the Confession of 1967 and an Introduction to the Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), pp. 214-50. Dowey's account of Westminster is by turns insightful and captious. Its doctrine of covenant and election (he avers) "abstracts and separates power from love, justice, and mercy, and God transcendent from God incarnate" (p. 241) and betrays "an inherent tendency to legalism" (p. 244)—hardly indisputable claims! Obviously, Dowey's own tastes were better represented by C-67, which is the standard by which he assessed Westminster; see Wilkinson's summary in "Politics of Reconciliation," pp. 177-83.
14. The history of the two catechisms' composition, debates, and approval is not easily unraveled, but a note in the *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, ed. Alexander F. Mitchell and John Struthers, (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874), pp. 485-86, indicates that the Shorter Catechism was prepared only on the heels of finishing the Larger and sending it to Parliament. The source cited is the *Journal of the House of Lords*, vol. 9 (22 October 1647), p. 488: "A Message was brought, by Mr. Prolocutor, from the Assembly of Divines; who said, 'The Assembly of Divines have made a long Catechism, which they present to their Lordships Consideration; and they intend shortly to prepare a shorter Catechism.' ¶ The House returned Thanks to the Assembly, for their ready Observance to the Orders of Parliament, and for their great Labour and Pains in compiling this long Catechism; and to desire them to go on in making the short Catechism, which their Lordships shall be ready to receive." Online at www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=37143 (accessed 10 Sept 2010). The dependence of the Shorter Catechism on the Larger was graciously confirmed by John Bower in private correspondence with me, 11 Sept 2010.
15. John Calvin, "Reply to Sadoleto," in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts*, ed. Henry Beveridge (3 vols., reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 1:33, italics mine.
16. For instance, John Ball's hugely popular *Short Treatise Containing All the Principal Grounds of Christian Religion* (2nd printing, London, 1617; later renamed *A Short Catechism*…) partially anticipated Westminster by thirty years: "Q. What ought to be the chief and continual care of every man in this life? A. To glorify God and save his soul." On the other hand, James Ussher's *A Body of Divinity* (London, 1647) began, "What is that which all men especially desire? Eternal life and happiness."
17. Even compensating for the length of these three documents, there is a stark contrast to be drawn with C-67, which uses *glory* only once, in the closing doxology from Eph. 3:20-21 (9.56).
18. My word counts here and elsewhere rely on the electronic (pdf) version of the *Book of Confessions* available at www.pcusa.org. I'm well aware that these counts draw on English translations rather than the originals of some of our confessions, but the patterns observed still seem generally reliable. In the tally of joy/enjoy, the Larger Catechism easily scores highest of all our confessional documents.
19. The first of the fifty-two catechetical lectures of William Ames (a widely-respected Puritan exile who died a decade before Westminster) is an excellent exposition of exactly this theme of what constitutes true human happiness, joy, and delight; see *The Substance of Christian*

Religion: Or, A Plain and Easie Draught of The Christian Catechisme in LII Lectures (London, 1659), pp. 1-12. He admirably traces this theme throughout the Bible, but his central text for this lecture is Ps. 4:6-8. Of special note is p. 10, where he confronts what we would regard as the puritanical stereotype: "Many think that there is no joy or gladness in the practice of godliness, so they shun godliness and the care of it as that which is full of sadness and melancholy. But the Scriptures teach otherwise . . ." (text slightly modernized).

20. The key texts for Augustine's discussion of the two kinds of love (use *vs.* enjoyment) are found in *On Christian Doctrine* and *The City of God*. For a concise overview, see Raymond Canning, "Uti / frui," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 859-61.
21. The primary sections where Westminster discusses the covenants are WCF chapter 7 (6.037-42) and WLC Q. 20-21 and Q.30-36.
22. Louis B. Weeks, *To Be a Presbyterian* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1983), p. 26; the new edition (Geneva Press, 2010) drops the reference to the covenant of works, but otherwise the revised passage (on pp. 23-24) perpetuates the basic misunderstanding of the first edition.
23. "[T]he *new* covenant . . . is not so called because it is contrary to the first covenant; for God is never inconsistent with himself, nor is he unlike himself. He then who once made a covenant with his chosen people had not changed his purpose, as though he had forgotten his faithfulness. It then follows that the first covenant was inviolable. . . . It being *new* no doubt refers to what they call the *form*. . . [b]ut the *substance* remains the same. By substance I understand the doctrine; for God in the Gospel brings forward nothing but what the Law contains. . . . For he has included in the Law the rule of a perfect life, and has also shown what is the way of salvation, and by types and figures led the people to Christ, so that the remission of sin is there clearly made manifest, and whatever is necessary to be known." John Calvin, *Commentary on Jeremiah* 31:31-32 (CTS edition, 4:126-27, slightly altered).
24. Edward A. Dowey, Jr., "Address for Presbyterians United for Biblical Confession" (November 23, 1965), an unpublished ms. cited in Wilkinson, "Politics of Reconciliation," p. 106.
25. Dowey, *Commentary on the Confession of 1967*, p. 215; for a summary of the critical reception of Dowey's *Commentary*, see Wilkinson, "Politics of Reconciliation," pp. 182-84.
26. Let the reader note that the various quotations that follow from the Westminster documents will usually have some abridgements, repunctuation, and sometimes changes to wording when specific terms are obsolete. Any rewording offered here is intended only for the sake of clarity — and, one hopes, to urge readers back to the original.
27. Hendry, *Westminster Confession for Today*, p. 15.
28. Hendry, *Westminster Confession for Today*, p. 16 (omitting Hendry's chapter references).
29. Calvin's discussion of the three uses of the law may be found in *Institutes* 2.7.6-15.
30. This historical detail is briefly reported by Bower, *Larger Catechism*, pp. 31-32.
31. Edward A. Dowey, Jr., "Now We Can Look Forward," *Presbyterian Life* 20 (April 1, 1967): 24. An accompanying news article in the same issue paraphrases Dowey to a slightly different effect: "The danger, according to Edward A. Dowey, chairman of the drafting committee, is that the whole new confessional position of the church may be simply dismissed, now that the discussion is over."
32. Edward A. Dowey, "*The Re-Forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism*: A Review," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 14/1 (1993):4-5, online at scdc.library.ptsem.edu/mets/mets.aspx?src=PSB1993141Dowey's trenchant critique of "formless 'critical modernism'" and "disjunctive pluralism" is all the more worth reading in view of his own theological views, which were by no means reactionary. But Dowey's exasperation with Reformed rhetoric stripped of Reformed substance could hardly be better expressed than where he observes that "this series is not claiming Reformed principles, but rather 're-formation,' a pusillanimous coinage that calls to mind its cognate, Reformed, without taking any position on what the Reformed tradition considers itself to be" (9).

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A Conversation with the Ecumenical Creeds

by Leanne Van Dyk

Strangely, when we approach the New Testament, we instinctively think that old is good, but when it comes to creeds and confessions we tend to assume that old is bad. We respect the fact that the Gospel of Mark is old, probably older than the other Gospels. In certain circles, Mark (and perhaps the enigmatic Q) have an extra quota of authenticity due to their age. The older Letter to the Galatians seems to carry more authority with some people than the later epistles to Timothy and Titus. But the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are routinely dismissed by some because they are so old. How can such old documents, so the argument goes, have anything to say to us in our contemporary setting? For these people, A Brief Statement of Faith and the Confession of 1967 seem much more relevant.

Kathleen Norris tells the story of a seminary student and an Orthodox priest-theologian at Yale Divinity School. It is a story that has been quoted widely because it so perfectly captures the contemporary suspicion of creeds. The theologian had come as a guest speaker to lecture on the history of the creeds in the Christian tradition. In a time for questions after the lecture, a student asked, "What can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the Creed?" The priest answered by saying, "Well, you just say it. With a little practice and effort, most can learn it by heart."

The student apparently felt misunderstood and so asked a follow-up question: "What am I to do if I find I cannot affirm parts of the Creed, like the Virgin Birth?" The answer was the same, "You just stand with the congregation and say it. You keep saying it. Eventually it will come to you, with practice and time." Once more the student, this time in a raised voice, said, "How can I say a creed that I do not believe?" Then the priest said, "It is not *your* creed, it is *our* creed. It may come to you, in time. For some, it takes longer than for others."[1]

The frustrated student was voicing an assumption that many in the church have—that ancient creeds are subject to individual scrutiny. If one agrees with them, fine. If one does not, then the creeds may be, perhaps even must be, discarded. The Orthodox theologian was operating with an entirely different assumption—that the ancient creeds are the treasurers of the whole church that shape and form us slowly over time. We place ourselves under their tutelage, in trust and confidence, because they have been the patient teachers of countless believers, who have gone before us. Now we too are in the procession of believers who stand after the proclamation of the Word and confess in one voice what we believe. Kathleen Norris's story is illuminating because we can place our own attitudes toward the ancient creeds with either the student or the priest—or perhaps we find sympathy with both.

We find sympathy with the student in the story, because, deep in our bones, we are children of the Enlightenment. We have all grown up assuming that we are the arbiters of our own destiny, that each of us individually decides what to buy, whom to marry, what our political convictions are, and what we believe. Yet we sympathize with the priest in the story because, deep in our hearts, we are lonely and anxious. We have discovered that the ideal of the "lone individual" of our culture is frequently isolating and dividing. On the one hand, we resist the notion of standing together with the generations of believers who have come before us to confess the great creeds of faith—we want to *choose*! On the other hand, we long to join our voice with the great chorus of voices proclaiming a common faith—we want to *belong*!

In our consideration of the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds, then, it is helpful to realize the ambiguity that many contemporary people sense when they rise to profess their faith in the words of one of these great ecumenical creeds. The uneasiness they may feel is seldom analyzed, of course. Few people say, "I am the heir of a confused Enlightenment inheritance. I long both for autonomy and connection. The words of the creeds raise this ambiguity in my mind."

Other cultural factors conspire against glad acceptance of the ancient creeds as well. The dominant cultural attitudes of the West are strikingly individualistic and autonomous. Although Asian and African cultures are more sensitive to family and community contexts, even these traditional cultures are being pressured by the segmenting forces of global economies and cultural influences from the West.

In this dominant global cultural model, each person is the sole arbiter of his or her own set of beliefs, opinions, and decisions. There are multiple ironies in this dominant cultural model, however. In spite of the claims of individual autonomy and freedom, it is no secret that adolescents are loathe to stand out from their peers and will carefully moderate their behavior to fit in with the crowd. This behavior does not disappear even among mature adults. The pressures of the group are powerful factors in consumer habits, a fact that advertisers are quick to exploit in their advertising campaigns. In spite of the fact that we like to think we make up our own minds about everything, our behavior in the marketplace, at least, betrays the deeper truth that we move with the crowd and have a profound need to fit in.

The pervasive antiauthoritarianism of contemporary culture also impacts attitudes toward worship and creeds. In a May 23, 2004, *Los Angeles Times* article, "Religion: the Do-It-Yourself Doctrine," journalist Charlotte Allen notes that a common attitude among contemporary Christians is that no one should tell anyone how to practice his or her faith, or even what the faith is. Interestingly, this attitude characterizes both progressive and evangelical sectors of the denominational spectrum. Allen notes that along with this attitude is an additional assumption that the ancient creeds crushed vibrant and diverse spiritualities in the early Christian communities, that they destroyed a flourishing of lively faith. What is common to these contemporary marks of American religion is a deep assumption that each person has an indubitable right to craft a tailor-made relationship with their own faith.

The ecumenical creeds do not fare well in this cultural climate. It is not difficult to see that when it comes to creeds and confessions, we tend to assume that old is bad. Some Christian observers, however, believe that the creeds are not a "take'em or leave'em" proposition. New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson puts in a good word for the ancient creeds, pointing out that they did not oppressively crush other flourishing spiritualities. Rather, they grew up in very early Christian communities as a way of defining *who* the people of faith were so that it could become clear *what* it meant to live by the faith. Johnson comments in Allen's article, "But nowadays it's amazing how many

people believe that the creeds were foisted on Christianity. There's this belief that structure and spontaneity are opposites, and that traditional Christianity is incompatible with mysticism and with communal and egalitarian experience. That's never been true. It's a sociological fantasy of the 1960s." Johnson would not deny that politics played a part in the formation of the creeds, especially the Nicene Creed and, later still, the fifth century Chalcedonian Definition. But the basic impulse to formulate creeds is not to dominate and oppress; rather, it is to express a fundamental identity in Christian faith. That identity sometimes came in the midst of persecution and opposition, a reality some Christian communities still experience in the world today.

The Function of Creeds

Because reciting a creed creates ambiguities for contemporary believers, it might be helpful to remind ourselves how creeds function and what their potential is for strengthening and nurturing Christian faith.[2] First of all, creeds *identify* Christian believers in the faith. This is exactly how the Apostles' Creed was used in the early history of the church. The roots of the Apostles' Creed go back deep into the early church, to the instruction of converts into the Christian faith.[3] After a period of instruction in the faith, often lasting for weeks or months, converts were ready for the sacrament of baptism. In the early church, baptism was the ceremony of drama and symbolism, highlighting the great change of identity that was about to happen to the convert, to be joined with the body of Christ and the community of believers. Each convert was asked a series of questions by the minister or priest. In an important third-century document, the church father Hippolytus records detailed instructions for baptism using an early form of the Apostles' Creed. Here we can see how the creed is used as a tool for shaping basic Christian identity.

> And [when] he [who is to be baptized] goes down to the water, let him who baptizes lay [his] hand on him saying thus:
>
> Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty?
>
> And he who is being baptized shall say: I believe.
>
> Let him forthwith baptize him once, having his hand laid upon his head.
>
> And after this let him say:
>
> Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God,
> Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
> Who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate, and died,
> And rose on the third day living from the dead
> And ascended into the heavens,
> And sat down at the right hand of the Father,
> And will come again to judge the living and the dead?
>
> And when he says: I believe, let him baptize him the second time.
>
> And again let him say:
>
> Dost thou believe in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh?
>
> And he who is being baptized shall say: I believe.
> And so let him baptize him the third time. [4]

Second, the ecumenical creeds *educate* persons in their Christian beliefs. One of my professors once commented that young Christian minds do not naturally come fully furnished with the content of the faith. Teachers are needed to bring in the "furniture"—the tables, sofas, and carpets of the major doctrines. That is why the Trinity, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are included in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, but precise lists of divine attributes are not. Smaller "decorative objects," say, the curtains and the candlesticks of the room, the theory of divine inspiration and the doctrine of the intermediate state, can come at a later time. But the creeds furnish the minds of new Christians with the basic furniture of faith.

This is why John Calvin insisted that the people in his congregation in Geneva memorize the Apostles' Creed. Most people in that city of refugees were illiterate tradespeople and merchants who had never received an education. Neither had they ever learned, in their spoken language, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. One of the reforms that Calvin brought to Geneva was worship services in the French language, the language of most of the people in the city. Calvin required that church members memorize the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed as a basic minimum of literacy in the faith. The creed functioned as a tool of education.

Third, the ecumenical creeds *unify* Christian believers. This can be seen most simply by the very first word of the Nicene Creed: the word "We." The purpose of the Nicene Creed was to unify a painfully divided Christian community over a dispute that had been brewing between two factions in the church. These factions had all the markings of political parties, with political maneuverings, followers, gifted speakers, smear campaigns, and genuine issues of importance.

The details of this doctrinal skirmish were complex and philosophically freighted, but the fundamental issue went to the very heart of the Christian gospel: Who is Jesus Christ? This basic question was then, and still is, of fundamental importance to Christians. Simply stated, the matter before the bishops of Nicea had to do with the identity of Jesus Christ. Is Jesus Christ truly God? Or is Jesus Christ a "junior-level deity"?

The Council of Nicea concluded with a vigorous affirmation of Jesus Christ's full divinity, of the fully divine nature of the incarnate Christ. The creed of Nicea, then, was formulated to state the faith of the whole church, the faith of what "we" believe. Yes, it was written by bishops, the teachers of the church, based on existing regional creeds already in use. But this creed, more than any other, has been received by the many diverse Christian traditions. Millions of Christian people stand each Sunday after the proclamation of the Word to say "We believe" in the affirmations of the Nicene Creed. This has been occurring for over fifteen hundred years in countless languages on every continent. When we express our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed, we stand with the "cloud of witnesses" that goes before us in the faith that unites us.

The capacity of creeds to unite believers is not limited to ancient creeds. The catechisms and confessions of the Reformation were also written in times of controversy and danger, and functioned to draw people together. The best contemporary example of the unifying role of creeds is the 1934 Barmen Declaration, now one of the confessional documents of the PC(USA). In the 1930s, the witness of the Christian church in Germany was co-opted by the official ideology of the Nazi regime. Pastors were required to pledge their allegiance to Adolf Hitler; swastika flags were hung in church sanctuaries, and pastors who spoke out in protest against the increasing Nazi control over both church and society were removed from their posts. A small resistance movement of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Church pastors organized the "Confessional Synod" of the German Evangelical Church to oppose the "German Christian" accommodation to National Socialism. A representative group of pastors drafted the Barmen Declaration as an appeal to the church to proclaim the lordship of Jesus Christ and resist the state's pretentions to lordship. In a context of threat to the integrity of the gospel and danger to the church, the Theological Declaration of Barmen brought the Confessing Church together, gave it an identity, and clarified its Christian call in that particular time and place.

Fourth, creeds have an *apologetic* and *polemical* function. This is perhaps the most difficult function for us to accept in a cultural context that is multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious. We live in a society that requires of us tolerance and acceptance for peoples of other cultures and other faiths.

Nevertheless, when Christians state what they believe, they also mark off what they do not believe. When we say the familiar words of the Apostles' Creed, for example, we are clearly indicating many alternatives that we do not affirm. Imagine saying the Apostles' Creed, declaring what you do believe and then silently declaring what you are rejecting. In our contemporary context, the primary affirmations of the Apostles' Creed might come with these accompanying rejections. [6]

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. (*not in the stock market or military might*)

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord (*not in the many false lordships of the world that tempt me to turn away from Jesus Christ or that offer themselves as alternatives to Christ*)

I believe in the Holy Ghost *(Not in my spirit as the final measure of reality)*.

In a religiously diverse culture, we sometimes get the mistaken impression that we must not reject *anything*, that it is somehow impolite to state clearly what we believe and, likewise, what we do not believe. But this is not the case. As our communities and neighborhoods become ever more diverse and multicultural, it is even more important to find clarity and identity in our baptism and in the creed that was spoken at our baptism.

Fifth, creeds have a *doxological* function. They are one of the ways we praise God, because the words of the creed give voice to our faith and trust in the one triune God whom we worship and glorify. This creedal way of praising God has long been practiced by the church as it has used the Apostles' Creed in celebrations of baptism and the Nicene Creed in the Eucharistic liturgy. When we think of the creeds as a gift of praise to God, as an offering of the best words the Christian tradition has produced to express its faith, the creeds can become a doxology rather than an act of rote memorization.

Sixth, the creeds *edify* Christians. The first meaning of the word "edify" in the dictionary is to "instruct," but this is not the meaning I have in mind. The second dictionary meaning of "edify" is to "enlighten." This points to the "aha" moments that sometimes occur when a new insight flashes or a fresh perspective dawns—or what happens, every once in a while, when a Christian believer recites the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. It may not happen often. But the creeds can edify; they can enlighten. So it pays to be alert. It even pays to study the creeds, to learn their unique language, their history, the issues at stake in their writing, for a fresh insight or new perspective may emerge from this process of study.

Consider an example. One particularly lovely line in the Nicene Creed is the first line about the Holy Spirit. "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life." This is a line that can be repeated dozens, hundreds of times, perhaps, until that one time when the sheer wonder of the "the Lord, the giver of life" lights

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up the interior space of your soul. You see that all the pulsing hearts, breathing lungs, and firing synapses in all the creatures of this planet and all the fiery gaseous planets of all the galaxies in the universe owe their very existence to the life-giving Holy Spirit. And the size of that thought is so immense that you have to hang on to the pew in front of you for a minute. That is the edification that the creeds offer now and then, if you pay attention to the words and what they mean.

Seventh, the creeds can *comfort* Christians. At times, the creeds may put broken believers back together again. Gordon MacDonald imagines that creeds are like the nails in his New Hampshire home. The clapboards work loose during the long, hard winters and need to be renailed each spring. "One of the great joys of repeating the Christian creed is that it gives an opportunity to reaffirm the central truths of God's revelation," MacDonald writes. "As we say 'I believe,' …we begin to hammer back the nails of our convictions and commitments." [7]

Even that most dense and abstract creedal word of all, the famous Greek word *homoousios*, had a pastoral intent. This precise philosophical word, which refers to Christ's full divine nature with the Father—"of one Being with the Father"—was also a model for the unity that ought to characterize the Christian. Thus, *homoousios*, the mysterious oneness between Father and Son, is the standard of mutuality and reciprocity within the Christian community as well. The ancient line in the Nicene Creed, "of one Being with the Father," might serve as a pastoral reminder of the kind of unity that ought to characterize relationships in our churches, our marriages, our social structures, and our friendships.

If we recognize the creeds as fellow workers in the common task of serving God, we will be able to study them and puzzle through them, yet consider them to be trusted guides and teachers, sages in the faith. Once we have listened well, we will have the freedom and confidence to bring our questions to them. Rainer Maria Rilke once advised a young poet, "I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart, and try to love the questions themselves." [8] Hasty conclusions about deep mysteries of the faith often short-circuit opportunities for growth. Perhaps the Orthodox priest was on to something: "Well, you just say it. With a little practice and effort, most can learn it by heart."

1. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 64-65. See Ron Byar's chapter on the creeds in *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), for a treatment of this story and a discussion of the creeds in our culture.
2. I am indebted to Scott Hoezee's helpful study guide *Speaking as One: A Look at the Ecumenical Creeds* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1997), 12-13.
3. See Joseph D. Small, "The Spirit and the Creed," in *Fire and Wind: The Holy Spirit in the Church Today*, ed. J. Small (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2002), 4-8.
4. *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr*, ed. Gregory Dix and Henry Chadwick (London: Alban Press, 1991), 20.1-2, pp. 30-31.
5. Robert Kingdom, ed. *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, vol. 1, 1542-1544 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 26.
6. I learned this polemical function of the affirmations of the creed from John D. Witvliet, who develops a similar approach to the use of doxology and praise in this article "Isaiah in Christian Liturgy: Recovering Textual Contrasts and Correcting Theological Astigmatism," *Calvin Theological Journal* 39, no.1 (April 2004): 135-56.
7. Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 168, quoted in Marianne Micks, *Loving the Questions* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 9.
8. Frances Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 19.

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