

*The*  
**Westminster Confession**  
*compared with the*  
**Three Forms of Unity**  
(The Heidelberg Catechism, The Belgic  
Confession and The Canons of Dordt)  
*by*

**Prof. Herman Hanko**

*Emeritus Professor of New Testament Studies and Church History*

**Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, USA**

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**Editorial note:** The following article was first published in the Protestant Reformed Theological Journal Vol XX No. 1 for November 1986, under the title: “*A Comparison of the Westminster and Reformed Confessions.*” In that the BRF has been involved in some controversy recently over the relationship between “Westminster” and the “Three Forms of Unity” (both sets of Standards are included in the BRF Doctrinal basis) Prof. Hanko’s comparative study would, we believe, shed some important light on the debate.

**B**efore we enter into a more detailed comparison between these two groups of Confessions, it is good to make some more general remarks about the origin of these Confessions, the occasion for writing them, and how these elements affected the general character of the creeds. This will lead us to a comparison rather broad and general, but will help in understanding some of the more specific differences.

The Westminster Confession was formulated within the Presbyterian tradition as it developed in the British Isles. In this respect it differed from the tradition of continental theology which produced such confessions as the *Confessio Belgica*, the *Confessio Gallicana*, the Canons of Dort, and also the Heidelberg Catechism.

What is this Presbyterian tradition? How did it affect the Westminster Confession? How does this tradition in placing its unique stamp upon the creeds which issued forth from it, cause these creeds to differ from (the) Three Forms of Unity?

We cannot, of course, enter into this question in detail, for it would carry us far afield into other areas which are not crucial to our present discussion. But a brief

look at this history will shed some interesting and important light on various broad differences which exist between these two groups of creeds.

(The) Three Forms of Unity are all "continental" creeds, reflecting continental theology. **The Heidelberg Catechism**, written in **1563**, arose out of the controversy which tore at Germany because of the introduction of Calvinism into what was predominantly a Lutheran country. The immediate occasion was a fight at the communion table between the Lutheran Tileman Heshusius and Deacon Klebitz, a Zwinglian. When efforts to resolve the controversy failed, Frederick III entrusted the work of writing a Confession to Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus. The twofold purpose was: 1) to secure harmony of teaching in the Palatinate; 2) to prepare a foundation for the religious instruction of the upcoming generation.

**The Belgic Confession**, prepared in **1561**, arose out of the persecution brought upon the Reformed in the Lowlands by Philip II. This persecution produced a number of martyrs which "exceeds that of any other Protestant Church during the sixteenth century, and perhaps that of the whole primitive church under the Roman Empire."<sup>1</sup> It was prepared by Guido de Bres with the aid of Adrien de Savaria (Professor of theology in Leyden and Cambridge), H. Modetus (chaplain to William of Orange), and G. Wingen. It was presented to Philip II in the hopes of gaining some toleration for the Calvinistic faith.

**The Canons of Dordt** (hereinafter referred to as "the Canons") arose out of the controversy in the Lowlands between the Arminian system of the Remonstrants and the Calvinism which had taken root in that land. While it is an answer to the five points of the Remonstrants, adopted at Gouda in 1610, it is primarily intended to be an explanation of some points in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism which arose out of that controversy.

The occasion for the **Westminster Confession** was different. Although Charles I had enjoyed considerable success in his efforts to impose prelacy on England, Scotland, and Ireland in the early years of his reign, gradually his fortunes waned, especially when the armies of Scotland entered the fray against him and his royal troops. As the war continued, gradually the Puritans became stronger both in the army under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell and in the nation as a whole, so that by about 1640 they were able to elect a majority to Parliament. This Parliament, sometimes called "The Long Parliament," called the Westminster Assembly of Divines together in Westminster Hall for the purpose of establishing uniformity of worship and church polity throughout the kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland. That it was a great Assembly no one can deny. Schaff remarks concerning

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Philip Schaff: *"The Creeds of Christendom"* (New York: Harper & Row 1931, reprinted by Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1990) Vol. 1 p.503.

this Assembly:

Whether we look at the extent or ability of the labors, or its influence upon future generations, it stands first among Protestant Councils. The Synod of Dordt was indeed fully equal to it in learning and moral weight, and was more general in its composition, since it embraced delegates from nearly all Reformed Churches; while the Westminster Assembly was purely English and Scotch, and its standards even to-day are little known on the continent of Europe. But the doctrinal legislation of the Synod of Dordt was confined to the five points at issue between Calvinism and Arminianism; the Assembly of Westminster embraced the whole field of theology, from the eternal decrees of God to the final judgment. The canons of Dordt have lost their hold upon the mother country; the Confession and Shorter Catechism of Westminster are as much used now in Anglo-Presbyterian Churches as ever, and have more vitality and influence than any other Calvinistic Confession. <sup>2</sup>

There are several points concerning this Assembly and its work which have direct bearing on our subject.

There is no question about it but that the truth set forth in the Westminster Confessions was Calvinistic throughout. The divines who produced these Confessions were not only, for the most part, strongly committed to the system of truth as set forth by the great Reformer, John Calvin, but they were also fully aware of the development of continental theology from the time of the Reformation till the time they met. Even more strongly, they were fully aware of the Arminian controversy which had raged only a few short years earlier in the Lowlands, and they were in basic agreement with the Reformed position. The Confessions were, however, cast into English form, particularly in the sense that there was a conscious effort to establish continuity in English theology between the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England as interpreted by the Lambeth Articles (1595) and the Irish Articles of Faith, drawn up by Bishop Ussher of Dublin (1615). In fact, the Assembly spent the first part of its work in an attempt to revise the Thirty-nine Articles, and only abandoned this effort when the Scottish delegates took their seat; and, because these delegates insisted on a joint swearing to the National League and Covenant of Scotland, the Parliament instructed the Assembly to draw up a new confession.

This was both its strength and its weakness. It was the strength of the Assembly and the Confessions which they drew up because it directly developed the fundamental truths of the Calvin Reformation in an indigenous way, fit for the Church of Christ as she was called to give testimony to her faith in the context of the British

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Schaff: *Op. Cit.*, p. 728

Isles. It was the weakness of the Assembly and the Confessions, because it was inescapable that the product of the Assembly would bear the mark of the unique character of the English Reformation.

While surely the time when the Westminster Assembly was called into session by the decree of Parliament was a time of unrest, war, and national confusion, the creeds which were produced are, from a certain point of view, quite different from the Three Forms of Unity. The Canons of Dordt bear the strong imprint of their birth in controversy, in the battle to defend the faith against violent and bitter attacks against it. The Westminster Confession gives no evidence of this. This is partly the reason why the Canons have such beautiful and strong pastoral sections in them, while the Westminster Confession, while not devoid of this pastoral character, nevertheless do not compare with the Canons in this respect. This is also partly why the Belgic Confession breathes the spirit of persecution and martyrdom as every article begins with the words, "We believe...," or "We all believe and confess..." or "We believe with our hearts..." The Westminster Confession, and its Catechisms, in contrast to this, are distinctly objective in their approach and set forth the truth in objective, and, necessarily cold, phraseology. This is also why there is such a great difference between the warm subjective approach of the Heidelberg Catechism and the statements of the Westminster Confession's Catechisms. As beautiful as the first question and answer of the Shorter Catechism may be ("What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."), it cannot compare with the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism:

**"What is thy only comfort in life and death?**

That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.... "

In close connection with this, the divines on the Westminster Assembly were by no means of one mind in all matters of faith and polity. Concerning matters of polity, the Assembly had represented Episcopalians (although most did not attend the sessions), Independents, Erastians, and Presbyterians. While this in itself had little effect upon the decisions (the views of the Presbyterians prevailed throughout), the differences in doctrinal viewpoint did affect the deliberations. Some who were present at the Assembly were more or less sympathetic to certain Arminian views, especially on the questions of reprobation and the extent of the atonement. While their views did not prevail and were not incorporated into the Confession, some softening of the position of the Calvinists is perhaps evident. It ought to be noted that men were present at the Assembly who belonged to the Davenant School and who were directly influenced by Amyraldianism. When the Confession was completed, they were not hesitant to sign the Confession, even though they had not changed their position. While we must treat this matter in greater detail a bit later, many students of the Westminster Confession claim that the Confession deliberately left room for

the views of these men.

All of this, however, cannot be understood except in the context of the purpose of the Parliament and the Assembly. Schaff writes Puritanism "aimed at a radical purification and reconstruction of Church *and State* (emph.mine) on the sole basis of the Word of God...."<sup>3</sup> It was manifestly the purpose of a Parliament and an Assembly, under the control of Puritan thinking, to establish Puritan theology and church polity as the basis of the kingdoms of England, Ireland, and Scotland. The Ordinance issued by Parliament convening the Westminster Assembly also demonstrates this. The purpose for calling the Assembly reads in part "for settling of the government and liturgy of the Church of England."<sup>4</sup> While it was true that a national religion was also established in the Lowlands and other parts of the continent, the Puritan purpose, as defined by the National League and Covenant, was different. Whether and how this left its mark upon the Confessions we shall examine at a later point in this article.

Puritanism also left its mark upon the Confessions in other ways. One need only compare the treatment, e.g., of the Christian Sabbath in the Heidelberg Catechism and in the Westminster Confession to understand that the chapter on Sabbath observance which appears in the Westminster Confession could only be written under the influence and within the context of Puritanism. The Puritan view of the Sabbath, not found in any continental creed and stricter than the view of Calvin himself, dominates in the Confession. The whole principle of "purity of worship," such a strong emphasis in Puritan thought, which we find in Chapter XXI, made possible, e.g., the denunciation of holy days .

At the same time, because these Confessions were written some 90 years after the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession, they demonstrate a maturity of thought and give evidence of a development of ideas which are not to be found in the earlier creeds. While the Canons were written only some 20 years before the Westminster Creeds, the Canons deal with a particular controversy and limit their development of doctrine to an answer to the Remonstrance of the Arminians. It is not surprising, therefore, that we find in the Westminster creeds a greater evidence of development at some key points. Murray writes:

The Westminster Confession is the last of the great Reformation creeds. We should expect, therefore, that it would exhibit distinctive features. The Westminster Assembly had the advantage of more than a century of Protestant creedal formulation. Reformed theology had by the 1640's attained to a maturity that could not be expected a hundred or even seventy-five years earlier.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid: Vol I, p. 703.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from A.F. Mitchell: "*The Westminster Assembly, Its History and Standards*", (London 1883) Vol. I, page 111.

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Controversies had developed in the interval between the death of Calvin, for example, and the Westminster Assembly, that compelled theologians to give to Reformed doctrine fuller and more precise definition.....No creed of the Christian Church is comparable to that of Westminster in respect of the skill with which the fruits of fifteen centuries of Christian thought have been preserved, and at the same time examined anew and clarified in the light of that fuller understanding of God's Word which the Holy Spirit has imparted. <sup>5</sup>

The demonstration of this will be found in our more detailed consideration of these Confessions.

In our more particular discussion of a comparison between the Westminster Confessions and the Three Forms of Unity, we shall have to set up certain limitations to the discussion, for time prevents a detailed examination of all points of difference. The first limitation is this: we shall not deal, except here and there in passing, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. Perhaps this is not necessary. The Larger Catechism, fundamentally an abridgment of the Westminster Confession itself, was intended to be used in the preaching; while the Shorter Catechism, in turn an abridgment of the Larger, was intended for the instruction of children. Matters of church polity and discipline are omitted from both. The Apostolic Confession is also omitted from both, although it was appended to the Shorter Catechism. In this connection it is interesting to note that a note was appended to the phrase, "He descended into hell," which explains this to mean that Christ was in Hades, i.e., the state of the dead, during the three days His body was in the grave. This differs markedly from the interpretation given by the Heidelberg Catechism, and is perhaps an indication of the lingering influence of the Thirty-nine Articles. We may also note in passing that the Larger Catechism is very detailed in ethical matters, again a reflection of Puritan influence.

The second limitation is quite obviously the inability in this article to deal in detail with differences between the two groups of Confessions. We cannot proceed through the Confession article by article and examine in what respects the Confession differs from our own Reformed creedal heritage. A few remarks will have to suffice. In the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person and natures of Christ, the Westminster Confessions follow the tradition of Nicea-Constantinople, Chalcedon, and the *Symbolum Quicunque*, and differ in no significant respects with the Reformed Confessions. The same is true of the doctrines of the creation and fall of man and his salvation in Jesus Christ. We may however observe that the Westminster Confession is stronger than the Reformed creeds on the matter of the imputation of the guilt of Adam's sin (VI, 3) and, subsequently, on the truth of imputed righteousness (XI, 1. See also The Shorter Catechism, 18 and 33). The

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. John Murray: "Collected Writings" (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976) Vol I, p.317.

Westminster Confession also has an entire chapter devoted to the question of free will (IX), and another chapter on good works (XVI), which is an extensive and excellent treatment of this subject. A few rather interesting details appear in the treatment of soteriology. In X, 3 mention is made of regeneration, although this is identified with effectual calling, but in XIII, 1 the two are mentioned side by side. In X, 3 appears a rather strange statement which seems to imply that it is possible for elect adults to be saved without the ministry of the Word. In XI, 4 eternal and temporal justification are mentioned together. In XVIII, where the question of assurance of grace and salvation is discussed, para.3 suggests that assurance does not belong to the essence of faith—a matter of considerable controversy among Presbyterians to this day. In the whole area of Ecclesiology and Eschatology, no significant differences appear between the two groups of confessions, although the Westminster Confession develops more extensively such ideas as the law of God (XIX), Christian liberty and liberty of conscience (XX), lawful oaths and vows (XXII), civil magistrates (XXIII) — where the authority to call Synods is given to the magistrates, Church censures (XXX), and Synods and Councils (XXXI). The Westminster Confession is also the only creed of importance in the Protestant tradition which labels the pope Antichrist (XXV, 6).

There are two important areas where the Westminster Confessions have a much more detailed treatment of vital doctrines than the Reformed Confessions. One is the doctrine of Scripture; the other is the doctrine of the covenant. A few brief remarks about both are in order.

No single Reformation creed has as detailed a treatment of the doctrine of Scripture as the Westminster Confession. In his book, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, B. B. Warfield devotes two lengthy chapters to a discussion of this matter.<sup>6</sup> In Murray's *Collected Writings*,<sup>7</sup> Murray says that the doctrine of Scripture in the Westminster Confession is formulated in such a way that it is relevant to today's disputes on Scripture.

The basic elements of Westminster's doctrine of Scripture are certainly found in the Three Forms of Unity. The Belgic Confession, Arts. 3-7, contains, as does the Westminster, such truths as the canon of Scripture, its sole authority, -and the proof of its authority. Canons V, 10 contains, as does the Westminster, the truth that God gives no revelation apart from Scripture. But in the Westminster some additional points are treated and some doctrines are treated more elaborately. I, 6 contains the striking and wellknown statement: "The whole counsel of God. . . is expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture." I, 8, in treating of the transmission of the original text, states that it was "by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages." This same article

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<sup>6</sup> Warfield; op. cit., (Mack Publishing , USA, 1972), chapters 3 and 4 comprising some 178 pages.

<sup>7</sup> Murray: op.cit., p. 318.

speaks of the need to translate the Scriptures into the vulgar language. Ch. I, 9 sets forth the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture.

We have in the Westminster a beautiful and important statement concerning the doctrine of Scripture which is of value in our day when Scripture is subject to such bitter attacks of the enemy.

The Westminster devotes the whole of Chapter VII to a discussion of **God's covenant with man**. This more extensive treatment of the covenant undoubtedly reflects certain advances which had been made in the area of federal theology. At the same time, it is in this chapter that mention is made of the **covenant of works**. Art. 2, which deals with this subject, reads: "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect obedience and faith." The covenant of works is once again mentioned in XIX, 1: "God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it."

Several remarks are in order concerning this concept of the Westminster. **In the first place**, it is striking that the concept "covenant of works," though certainly known in continental theology at the time of the Synod of Dordt, was nevertheless, not incorporated into that creed.

**In the second place**, the whole idea of the covenant of works, from the time of Dordt on the continent and from the time of the Westminster Assembly in England, has been an integral part of federal theology. The idea was never seriously questioned in any circles and by any Reformed or Presbyterian theologian until it was given careful analysis and subjected to thorough scrutiny by Rev. Herman Hoeksema. It ought not, therefore, to surprise us that it appears in the Westminster.

**In the third place**, the question arises whether the divines at Westminster meant by the concept "covenant of works" the same thing as covenant theologians of the last century or so. A case is sometimes made for the fact that this is not true; and as evidence, it is pointed out that while the Westminster speaks of the promise of life, it does not specifically mention eternal life in heaven and refers only to perpetual life in Paradise. If this is the case, so it is argued, one takes out of the concept the whole idea of merit—an idea which is a crucial part of the objection to the concept.

It is not so easy to determine the answer to this question. If one studies the history of federal theology both on the continent and in England, one discovers: 1) that the covenant of works entered the thinking of federal theologians because the whole

development of the covenant was within the context of the idea of the covenant as an *agreement* between two parties: God and man. With this notion the idea of a covenant of works fits precisely. 2) Already at the time of Westminster, certain theologians in England who dealt with the doctrine of the covenant spoke of everlasting life in heaven as being the reward promised to Adam on condition of perfect obedience.

Nevertheless, it is also true that most covenant theologians, if not all, inveighed fiercely against any idea of merit in the whole work of salvation and in all God's dealings with man (see XVI, 4, 5). To us it is clear that the promise to Adam of everlasting life on condition of obedience and the idea of merit are woven of the same fabric. Whether it was so clear to the Westminster divines is another question.

**There are three areas of the Westminster Confession in which a more detailed analysis is in order.** These three areas are: 1) the doctrine of God's eternal decree; 2) the idea of the "offer"; and, 3) the doctrine or the extent of the atonement. These three areas are, however, closely related to each other, as all commentators on the Westminster Confession admits.

God's eternal decree is discussed in Chapter III, although mention is also made of this subject in Chapter V, which deals with providence. A number of points ought to be made in connection with this subject. In the first place, the Westminster Confession strikingly uses the word "predestinate" for God's determination to bring His elect to everlasting life, while the term "foreordain" is used with respect to the reprobate. Murray, commenting on this, says that the reason for this is not clear from the historical records.<sup>8</sup>

In the second place, the question arises whether the formulation of this doctrine follows the infra- or supralapsarian line. Murray writes:

The section just quoted (III, 6) from the *Confession* requires comment from another angle. On the question of the order of the divine decrees the *Canons of Dordt* are infralapsarian. This would appear to be the purport of Article VII when it says that election *is* that whereby God hath "chosen in Christ unto salvation a certain number of men from the whole human race, which had fallen by their own fault from their original integrity into sin and destruction, neither better nor more worthy than others but with them involved in common misery", but it *is* clearly set forth in Article X when it is said that "God was pleased out of the common mass of sinners to adopt some certain persons as a peculiar people to Himself" The *Confession* might seem to have the same intent. "Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ". This would not be correct. The words "being fallen in

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. John Murray: "Calvin, Dordt, and Westminster on Predestination - A Comparative Study" being Ch. 8 in the Compendium "Crisis in the Reformed Churches" (Ed. Peter Y. De Jong, publ. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, by Reformed Fellowship Inc. 1968) and page 151.

Adam" do not imply that the elect when elected were contemplated as fallen in Adam. The words simply state an historical fact which explains the *necessity* of redemption by Christ and the other phases of salvation. The *Confession* is non-committal on the debate between the Supralapsarians and Infralapsarians and intentionally so, as both the terms of the section and the debate in the Assembly clearly show. Surely this *is* proper reserve in a creedal document.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, all the language employed by the Westminster divines is *infra* language: "Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life..." (III, 4); "Wherefore they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ. . ." (III, 6); "The rest of mankind God was pleased. . . to pass by. . ." (III, 7). (See also VI, 1, where the sin of Adam is said to have been permitted.) And, of course, this is also true of the Three Forms of Unity.

In the third place, it is a matter of no little importance that the Canons, when speaking of both election and reprobation, use the singular, "decree": "That some receive the gift of faith from God, and others do not receive it proceeds from God's eternal decree. . ." (I, 6). While the Westminster Confession itself also uses the singular, it is striking that the Shorter Catechism uses the plural in Q and A. 7, 8. Some have argued from this that the use of the singular or plural was not important to the divines of Westminster.<sup>10</sup> However, this is probably not true in the light of the fact that the Shorter Catechism, in its use of the plural "decrees," is speaking also of the decrees of creation and providence.

In the fourth place, while it must certainly be maintained that the viewpoint of Westminster in the doctrine of reprobation is *infra*, reprobation is emphatically said to be God's decree: "The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice" (III, 7). In fact, the Westminster is not even satisfied with defining God's sovereign relation to sin in terms of mere permission: "The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding (Latin: *limitatio*), and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends. . ." (V, 4). On this point Cunningham observes:

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.154.

<sup>10</sup> Warfield: Op. cit., p. 126. See also A.F. Mitchell & J. Struthers:(Eds.): "*Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*" (Great Britain) Vol. I p. 54 ff.

In this statement there *is* apparent at once the deep conviction of the necessity, in order to bringing out fully the whole substance of what scripture teaches upon the subject, to ascribe to God something more than a bare permission in regard to man's sinful actions, combined with the felt difficulty of stating, with anything like fulness, and at the same time explicitness, what this something more is.....<sup>11</sup>

The Westminster in this respect agrees completely with the Canons on this crucial point.

From the records left to us of the meeting of the Assembly it is evident that the statement, "to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin," was hotly debated in the meetings. Some, especially Dr. Whitaker, wanted this idea removed, then altered. But when it was retained unchanged Dr. Whitaker entered his dissent.<sup>12</sup> Murray is right, therefore, when he denies that the Confession refuses to distinguish between reprobation (judicial) and preterition and speaks only of the former, as some allege.<sup>13</sup>

From all this we may conclude that no fundamental difference exists between the Westminster Confession and the Three Forms of Unity on this crucial point.

We turn now to the question of the extent of the atonement.

The direct references in the Westminster Confession to the extent of the atonement are found in III, 6, VIII, 5, 6, 8. Chapter VIII is, of course, the crucial chapter, because it deals with Christ the Mediator. The pertinent articles read as follows. VIII, 5: "The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of His Father, and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, *for all those whom the Father hath given unto him.*" VIII, 6: "Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto *the elect....*" VIII, 8: "*To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption* he doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same...." But the reference in III, 6 is also important because it limits the extent of the atonement to the elect emphatically as being the only ones for whom Christ died:

"As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. William Cunningham: "Historical Theology" (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust 1979 reprint of T.&T. Clarke edition, Edinburgh 1863) Vol. I pp. 633-634.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Warfield: op. cit., pp. 131 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Murray: op. cit., in "Crisis in the Reformed Churches" page 155.

are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. *Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.* " (Emph. mine).

As was true of the doctrine of God's eternal decrees, so it was also true of this doctrine that much debate swirled around it in the discussions on the floor of the Assembly. All agreed that the atonement of Christ was sufficient for all—as the Canons also express it (II, 3). But the question was, whether the divine intention was determined in its extent by the sufficiency of the atonement or by its efficacy. The latter was the view that prevailed in the Assembly, while the former was defended strongly by those who supported Amyraldianism. That is, the view that prevailed was that the extent of the atonement, in God's intention, was limited to the elect alone for whom the suffering of Christ was efficacious. The Amyraldians argued that the atonement was universal in God's intention, because its extent was determined by its sufficiency and it was sufficient for all men everywhere. Not only did such Amyraldians as Seaman, Vines, Marshall, and Calamy defend this proposition, but Richard Baxter did the same. Shaw<sup>14</sup> speaks of this in quoting from Baxter:

The celebrated Richard Baxter, who favoured general redemption, makes the following remark upon this and another section of our Confession: "Chap. III, sec. 6, and chap. VIII, sec. 8, which speak against universal redemption, I understand not of all redemption, and particularly not of the mere bearing the punishment of man's sins, and satisfying God's justice, but of that special redemption proper to the elect, which was accompanied with an intention of actual application of the saving benefits in time. If I may not be allowed this interpretation, I must herein dissent."

Universalists, following Baxter, have since the time of the writing of this creed insisted that the creed left room for their position. Warfield<sup>15</sup> gives the rather involved argument which the Universalists used to prove their point, an argument into which we need not enter here.

Of more interest to us is the fact that, subsequent to the adoption of the creed, a great deal of argumentation has appeared in support of this idea (that the Westminster does not specifically exclude universalism) because of the mention of the "offer" in the Westminster Confession. While we must say a few things about this matter of the offer a bit later, we ought here to consider it insofar as it has bearing on this question.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Robert Shaw: "An Exposition of the Confession of Faith" (Philadelphia 1847) p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit., pp. 143 ff.

Schaff claims<sup>16</sup> that the idea of the offer contradicts, or at least leaves open, the question of the extent of the atonement as limited to the elect as this is taught in ch. III, 6 and VIII, 8. Mitchell and Struthers claim<sup>17</sup> that the Davenant men accepted the strict statement of the atonement because the articles on the offer left room for their view. And so the argument has continued until the present.

That the question of the offer is inseparably related to the question of the extent of the atonement is proved by the fact that Calamy argued on the Assembly that universal redemption was necessary to maintain the offer.<sup>18</sup> While we cannot answer this question without considering what the Confession teaches on the subject of the offer, we can point out here that whatever else may be true, the Westminster divines did intend to limit extent of the atonement in its efficacy to the elect only. This is clear from III, 6, quoted above. The question is: What is the extent of the atonement as far as the *intention* of God is concerned?

That brings us to the teaching of the Westminster Confession on the matter of the offer.

The term itself is used in VII, 3: "Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely *offereth* (Latin *offers*) unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe." The term appears again in X, 2, although the Latin uses a different word: "This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from any thing at all foreseen in man; who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace *offered* (Latin: *exhibitam*) and conveyed in it." In Q. and A. 86 of the Shorter Catechism the word "offer" also appears: "What is faith in Jesus Christ? Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is *offered* (Latin: *offertur*) to us in the gospel."

There is no question about it that these uses of the term "offer" have often been appealed to in support of the idea that the Westminster divines held not only to an intention on God's part to save all men, but that the idea of a general atonement was not specifically condemned so as to make the offer sincere. Whether this is a correct and honest interpretation of the creed is another question.<sup>19</sup>

There are several considerations in this connection which would seem to militate

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<sup>16</sup> Schaff: op. cit., Vol. I p. 772 footnote 1.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell & Struthers: op. cit., Vol. I p.58.

<sup>18</sup> Warfield: op. cit., pp. 138-142.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Herman Hanko: "The History of the Free Offer of the Gospel" part 4 in Protestant Reformed Theological Journal XVII: 2.

against this.

In the first place, the word "offer" as used in X, 2 is clearly not at issue here. The Latin *exhibitam* shows that the framers of the Westminster had something quite different in mind than any idea of God's intention to save all men.

In the second place, the word "offer" need not have the connotation it was given by the men of the Davenant School and is given today by the defenders of the free and well-meant offer of the gospel. This is evident, in the first place, by the fact that the term itself in the Latin means "to present." And, in the second place it is used in this sense in the Canons in III & IV, 9.

In the third place, there is evidence that the meaning given to "offer" by the Davenant men was not the meaning of many on the Assembly. According to Warfield,<sup>20</sup> Rutherford, a prominent member of the Assembly, seems to have used the term only in the sense of the preaching of the gospel. Warfield also claims<sup>21</sup> that Gillespie, another gifted divine, spoke of "offer" in the sense of preaching or in the sense of command when he claimed, during the debate, that command does not always imply intention. For example, when God commands all men to repent of sin and believe in Christ, this does not necessarily imply that it is God's intention to save those whom he commands. Shaw argues the same point and claims that the Assembly used the term "offer" only in the sense of "present."<sup>22</sup>

In the fourth place, Schaff may claim that the Westminster divines may have contradicted themselves by limiting the atonement on the one hand to the elect, and introducing on the other hand the idea of an offer, something which requires a universal atonement. **But there is a *prima facie* case against this.** The Westminster divines knew their theology too well to commit such a blunder. And, if conceivably this were possible, the very fact that the point was argued on the floor would preclude any such conclusion. If then the Westminster divines were intent on limiting the atonement only to the elect, and if they knew that an offer in the sense of God's intention to save all required a universal redemption, they would certainly not have included any such idea into the creed.

Finally, the language of the article VII,3 itself all but requires a favorable meaning to the word. The phrase, "requiring of them faith in him that they might be saved" certainly is intended to explain the phrase, "wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ."

From these considerations we may conclude that the use of this term in the Westminster Confessions has the same meaning as its use in the Canons.

<sup>20</sup> Warfield: op. cit., p.141.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p.142.

<sup>22</sup> Shaw: op. cit., p.104

There is, however, one other matter to which attention must be called in this connection. X, 4 speaks of common operations of the Spirit: "Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore can not be saved...." It is quite clear from the remainder of this article that the divines had in mind *good* influences. It is also clear that later Puritan thinking, especially the Marrow men, connected this with the well-meant offer of the gospel. In fact Cunningham<sup>23</sup> is so bold as to say that all Calvinists maintain that certain benefits of the atonement accrue to all men.

The Westminster divines do not give any further explanation for this statement, and we are left to speculate what they may have meant by it. It is possible that they referred to the fact, common in later Puritan teaching, that the preaching of the law can and usually does have some kind of influence upon the unregenerated hearer so that he is able to see his sin, even sorrow to some extent for it, show an interest in Christ as the One through Whom he can escape from sin, and even have a certain longing for the blessedness of which the gospel speaks. In its reaction to the cold dead orthodoxy of the Church of England and the terrible worldliness which characterized so many of her members, and because the Puritans possessed a defective view of the covenant, religious experience was to them a crucial aspect of salvation. And their view of the effect of the gospel, especially the preaching of the law, was influenced by this. If this is indeed true, this idea is condemned by the Canons in III & IV, 4. But we can only speculate.

Taking all these things into consideration, it is our conviction that, while the Westminster Confession is clearly Presbyterian and while differences certainly exist between English Presbyterian theology and continental Reformed theology, these differences are of such a kind that they are non-essential, that no barriers to true unity exist between those who hold to them in their doctrine and life and those who maintain the continental Confessions as their confessional basis, and that they stand solidly in the tradition of the Calvin Reformation.

### POSTSCRIPT

"This article was originally prepared for an Officebearers' Conference of the clergy and elders of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Its specific occasion was a visit to our churches of delegates from the Bible Presbyterian Church of Larne, (BPC), Northern Ireland, who had travelled to our country to discuss with our churches the possibility of fraternal relations between them and us. Since this congregation was organized on the basis of the Westminster Confession, it was thought to be helpful to prepare a paper comparing the Westminster

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<sup>23</sup> Cunningham: op. cit., Vol II p. 409.

Confession with the Confessions of the Reformed Churches.

"The result of the rather lengthy discussions between the PRC and the BPC of Larne was an addition to the Constitution of the Committee for Contact With Other Churches of the PRC. This addition reads: that the reference in the constitution to "Reformed standards," "has been interpreted by synod [Acts 1985, Art. 23] to include the "Westminster Confession and Catechisms."

This must not, however, be construed as meaning that the PRC are in agreement with everything in the Westminster Confession. The PRC, on the basis of the footnote to the Belgic Confession of Faith, Art. 36, believes the formulation of the Westminster Confession for purposes of establishing Presbyterianism as the national religion in the British Isles was wrong. Further, the PRC does not agree with the position of the Westminster Confession on divorce and the remarriage of the "innocent" party. And, finally, while the language of the Westminster Confession on the covenant of works is acceptable because of what the Westminster Confession does not say, the theologians who were contemporary to Westminster held to a view of the covenant of works which plainly teaches that Adam could, if remaining obedient, merit eternal life in heaven. This view of "merit" is rejected by the PRC."

*Herman Hanko, April 2000.  
Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

**C**onfessions, in due subordination to the Bible, are of great value and use. They are summaries of the doctrines of the Bible, aids to its sound understanding, bonds of union among their professors, public standards and guards against false doctrine and practice. In the form of Catechisms they are of especial use in the instruction of children, and facilitate a solid and substantial religious education, in distinction from spasmodic and superficial excitement. The first object of creeds was to distinguish the Church from the world, from Jews and heathen, afterwards orthodoxy from heresy, and finally denomination from denomination. In all these respects they are still valuable and indispensable in the present order of things. Every well-regulated society, secular or religious, needs an organization and constitution, and can not prosper without discipline. Catechisms, liturgies, hymn-books are creeds also as far as they embody doctrine.

**E**xperience teaches that those sects which reject all creeds are as much under the authority of a traditional system or of certain favorite writers, and as much exposed to controversy, division, and change, as churches with formal creeds.

*Philip Schaff: THE CREEDS OF CHRISTENDOM.....Vol. 1 pp. 8-9*