The Origin and Formation of the Westminster Confession of Faith

As early as 1540, two great types of the reform of religion in northern Europe had made themselves manifest. Luther had molded the one type. Calvin had molded, or begun the molding of, the other. Luther was for retaining of medieval doctrine, government, worship, many things – whatever seemed to him desirable and not forbidden in the Word of God. Calvin was for bringing the Church into conformity with the pattern shown in the Word. He would have the Church hold the faith taught in the Word, govern itself according to the principles taught in the Word, and conduct its exercises of worship according to maxims derivable from the Word. He believed in the sufficiency of the Scriptures as a rule of faith and practice, and would have had the Church conform in all respects to Scripture teaching. Lutheranism was the great type of moderate reform in northern Europe. Calvinism was the great type of thoroughgoing reform. Owing to the peculiar genius of the German people and to the peculiar favoring providences, Lutheranism prevailed widely throughout north Germany and Scandinavia, but not a few in these regions carved a more thoroughgoing reform. Owing to the peculiar genius of the French, the Dutch, and south Germans, and to favoring providences, Calvinism prevailed in France, in the Netherlands, and in certain south German States and cities; amongst these peoples, however, there were some who had a greater love for features of the medieval Church and would have retained them. There were, thus, on the Continent two great types of reform movement, the one dominant in the one quarter, and other dominant in other quarters. At the same time, in the sphere within which moderate reform prevailed there was more or less demand for thoroughgoing reform; and in the sphere within which thoroughgoing reform prevailed there was more or less desire for merely moderate reform.

In England, also, two types of reform were clearly manifest from the early days of Queen Elizabeth, the one a moderate, the other a type tending to thoroughgoing reform, each type indigenous, but each type strengthened by influences from beyond the Channel. The development of these two types of ecclesiastical reform in England was mightily influenced by the action of the crown, the one type being swerved by attraction, the other stimulated by opposition. In no other country did the throne influence the character of

reform so greatly. This was owing to this fact, amongst other forces, that the head of the English State had been made the head of the English Church. Henry VIII had, for personal and, in the main, base reasons, revolted from the Papal rule; and had secured at the hands of Parliament in 1534 the "Act of Supremacy," which ordered that the King "shall be taken, accepted and reputed the only supreme Head in earth of the Church of England, and shall have and enjoy annexed and united to the Imperial Crown of this realm as well the title and style thereof as all the honors, jurisdictions, authorities, immunities, profits and commodities to the said dignity belonging, with full power to visit, repress, redress, reform, and amendall such errors, heresies, abuses, contempts and enormities, which, by any manner of spiritual authority or jurisdiction might or may lawfully be reformed." While Henry vacillated somewhat in his attitude toward the reform movement, owing to political exigencies, and unwittingly furthered Protestantism at times, as in authorizing the publication of the Scriptures in the vernacular, he remained, at heart a Romanist, in revolt against Papal rule, and was hostile to any representative of reform of either type who was bold enough steadily to maintain his convictions. During the reign of his son, Edward, moderate reform was favored. During the reign of Mary, who succeeded Edward, every type of reform was bitterly and relentlessly persecuted. No less than two hundred and eighty persons were burned at the stake, and many hundreds of persons were driven into exile. By the ruthlessness of her opposition Mary did much, however, to fertilize and stimulate the Protestant cause. She was succeeded, in 1558, by her half-sister, Elizabeth. This last representative of the House of Tudor, though at heart holding a religion not very different from the Anglo-Catholicism of her father, so far as she had any religion, was forced by circumstances to favor Protestantism. Naturally, she favored moderate reform and fought thoroughgoing reform. This and her lust for power led her to resist constitutional changes that were proposed in the Church, just where she pleased. An aristocratic hierarchy, though with noble exceptions, naturally also, sided with her in repressing both the civil and the religious liberties of the people. With Elizabeth the Tudor dynasty became extinct. The Stuart dynasty succeeded to the throne in the person of James, VI of Scotland, I of England. Brought up under Presbyterian tutelage, but with the blood of tricksters in his veins, he knew and approved the better, but followed the worse way. The party of moderate reform was regarded by him

as more in harmony with civil monarchy. Moreover, that party pleased him by approving his fatal theory of the divine right of kings, and by endless and unseemly flatteries. His son Charles, who followed him to the throne, swung back toward Roman Catholicism – to Anglo-Catholicism. During these two Stuart reigns the party of moderate reform, enjoying the favor of the court, and tending toward Anglo-Catholicism, united with the court in a bitter effort at repression of the party of thoroughgoing reform. This persecution, together with the spread of Arminianism among the moderate reformers, stimulated into large vigor of life the party tending to thoroughgoing reform.

The party tending to thoroughgoing reform in England in the age of Bloody Mary finds its rootlets in Ridley, Hooper, Latimer, and others, and in part of the work of Cranmer. It finds rootlets reaching further back – to Tyndale, who, prior to this death in 1536, had spread widely his translation of the New Testament in Scotland as well as in England. Some of its rootlets reach even further back – to the followers of Wycliffe and to Wycliffe himself. But while thoroughgoing reform was thus indigenous to England, it received a mighty impulse from the Continent, and particularly from Geneva. Many of those driven from England by the Marian persecutions found a congenial exile at Geneva, and became apt and honest pupils of the great Calvin. At the beginning of Elizabeth's reign they returned thoroughly imbued with those views of Scripture truth which he taught with clarity and force elsewhere unparalleled. The Calvinistic theology became the theology of the great men of the Anglican Church during the first forty years of Elizabeth's reign. The most of these great men would willingly have tolerated a more thoroughgoing reform of the government and worship of the Church. Some of them positively and openly favored further reform in these departments. But Elizabeth stood in the way. In 1563 the formularies of the Anglican Church were completed, containing Protestant doctrines along with a medieval hierarchy and partially medieval cultus. In the following year the queen began the attempt to enforce a rigid uniformity – an attempt resulting in the expulsion from the Established Church of many of the godliest ministers of all England. Further trouble arose over the private meetings for worship in London at which Knox's Book of Common Order was used instead of the Liturgy, and over the more public meetings known as prophesyings – gatherings of ministers and pious laymen for the study and exposition of the Scriptures – very important meetings, as proven in their use

in Zurich, Geneva, and Scotland. Elizabeth commanded their suppression. Before Elizabeth had been on the throne a score of years a considerable number of advocates of thoroughgoing reform, "who had been led on to substantially Presbyterian opinions, but discouraged by friends abroad and debarred by the authorities at home from overtly seceding from the national church, began to hold secret private meetings for mutual conference and prayer, and possibly also for the exercise of discipline over those who voluntarily joined their associations and submitted to their guidance. It is even said that a presbytery was formed at Wandsworth in Surrey, wherein eleven lay-elders were associated with the lecturer of that congregation and certain leading Puritan clergymen. But if this was really a formal presbytery, it is probable that it was what was then called the lesser presbytery or session, not the greater presbytery or classis to which the name is now usually restricted. It is more certain that when Cartwright, the redoubted leader of this school of Puritans, was arrested in 1585 and his study searched, a copy was found of a Directory for churchgovernment, which made provision for synods, provincial and national, as well as for presbyteries, greater and lesser. This, according to some authorities, had been subscribed by about five hundred Puritans of this school, and, for some years . . . had, to a certain extent, been carried out, and a church within the church virtually formed." These and all other expressions of thoroughgoing reform Elizabeth did her utmost to stamp out, using the despotic Courts of Star Chamber and High Commission without regard to the feelings and convictions of many of the most patriotic, learned, and Christian of her subjects, but with disastrous failure as the result. Her tyrannical measures called out and developed love for the more biblical form of religion which she persecuted. They multiplied the advocates of thoroughgoing reform, or Puritans, as they came early to be called in England.

It has been said that the chief thing for which the Puritans all along contended was the "principle that the church has no right to burden the consciences of her members in matters of faith and worship with aught that is contrary to or beside (i.e.,in addition to) the express or implicit teaching of the Word of God," that they would restrict the authority of the church within narrower limits than their opponents; that they did not at first perceive the full import of the principle for which they contended; that they were reluctant to extend it rigidly to the constitution and government of the church as well as to her

articles of faith and forms of worship; but that, as the contest proceeded, they could not fail to be led on more and more distinctly to assert it with a fuller consciousness of its far-reaching consequences, and a more earnest longing to bring back the church in constitution and government as well as in faith and worship, to what they believed to be the pattern showed in the mount." The demand for a further reformation of religion had grown great in England as early as the death of Elizabeth and the succession of James Stuart of Scotland to the English throne. It had been augmented just at the close of the sixteenth century by the introduction of Arminianism into England. The demand was fanned into a flame by the arbitrary and retroactive measures of James I, of Charles I, and especially by the measures of Charles and his ministers, Laud and Wentworth.

In 1603, James I, son of Mary Stuart, acceded to the English throne. He was learned but wanting in common sense. A tyrant in politics, a bigot in religion, he thought that he had been commissioned of God to re-establish the Davidic Theocracy in England. He attempted the exercise of absolute authority in his kingdom, dispensing largely with the use of Parliaments. Civil rights were trampled under his feet, religious grievances were multiplied. All this had been presaged in his treatment of the Puritan Millenary petitioners – by his haughty, arrogant, and brutal treatment of their representatives, voiced in his maxims set forth at the Hampton Court Conference: "No bishop, no king"; "A Scottish Presbytery agreeth as well with the monarchy as God with the devil. Now Jack and Tom and Will and Dick shall meet and at their pleasure censure me and my council . . . let that alone"; "I will have one doctrine, one discipline, one religion in substance and ceremony." In order to win a Spanish, or French, princess for wife to his son Charles, he flattered Rome and outraged national sentiment. He ordered the publication of the Book of Sports, enjoining games and other festivities after services on the Lord's Day. By such means he arrayed against himself the landed gentry, the merchants, the professional men, and some of the nobility – the classes which stood for Parliamentary government and amongst whom the Puritan movement had its strength. They were indignant at his degradation of the morals of the people, his support of profligates at Court, his development of the Church worship in a Romeward direction.

Charles I inherited the absolutist views of his father in intensified form. He was heir also to the unrest, dissatisfaction, and abhorrence of Stuart

arbitrariness which James' measures had created. The conflict went on. Other provocations were given the lovers of liberty and truth. Charles claimed and exercised the authority to levy and collect taxes – an authority which belonged to the Parliament as the representative of the people. He aspired to rule as did Louis XIV of France. The Huguenots of France and the Lutherans of Denmark were going down before Roman Catholics; and King Charles was showing favor to Romanists, had a Romanist wife, and might give them a Roman Catholic king in the next generation. The king and Archbishop Laud were pressing for uniformity of increasing rigidity. A stress was laid on the divine right of Episcopacy which unchurched all non-Episcopal churches. The communion table was turned into an altar. A doctrine of the real presence, hard for the people to distinguish from the Romish, was advocated. Some of the bishops commended the invocations of the saints. Arminius and Arminians at the time favored the pretensions of the king over against the Parliament, and were beginning the revision of the ceremonial in a Romeward direction. They were becoming numerous and prominent, “so that Bishop Morely being asked what the Arminians hold, replied with truth as well as wit, `They hold the best bishoprics and deaneries in England.'”

The agents of Charles for carrying out his policies in Church and State, William Laud and Wentworth, were men of his spirit, narrow zealots. In enforcing uniformity to his medievalized ritual, Laud used the scourge, the pillory, the prison, the cropping of ears, the slitting of noses, and other such gentle persuasives.

The liberties, civil and religious, of England were at stake. A war in behalf of these liberties was at hand. The war in behalf of a more biblical form of religion began in Scotland. The Reformation in essentially the Genevan form had been established in the northern kingdom between 1560 and 1590. The struggle against popery over, a struggle against prelacy, lasting a hundred years, ensued. Against determined opposition, James and his government had succeeded in the re-establishment of Episcopacy in 1610. About the middle of his reign, Charles and Archbishop Laud attempted to conform the Scottish Church to the Anglican model. They proceeded about the business as if the Scots were mere wooden men. In 1636, on the authority of the king alone, a body of canons for the government and discipline of the Scottish Church was issued. The next year, in the same autocratic way, a new liturgy was assigned to the Scots. It was the old English Prayer Book revised in a way thought to

savor of Romanism. Popular resentment flamed. The National Covenant (1638) was brought forth and enthusiastically signed, for the defense of the Reformed religion and resistance to innovations. The new regulations were declared abolished. Episcopacy was swept away, and the nation resorted to arms to maintain their liberties.

To get the sinews of war with which to subjugate the Scots, Charles summoned the English Parliament, without which he had ruled for eleven years. Parliament at once set itself to avenge grievances. Charles dissolved it. Almost immediately he was forced to call another. It was in sympathy with the Scots. It had a large leverage over Charles in the fact that by a treaty into which the king had entered, the Scottish army was to be paid before it was disbanded. Parliament knew the value of this lever. It began the rectification of abuses, impeached, and committed to the Tower, Wentworth (Strafford) and Laud, passed a bill to prevent its own dissolution or prorogation except by its own free consent (May, 1641) put religion to the front, passed an ordinance against Laud's ceremonies and the Sunday sports, expelled the bishops from the House of Lords (January, 1642), decreed the hierarchy out of existence (November, 1642), the bill to take effect November 5, 1643, enacted the Grand Remonstrance, a restatement of all past grievances against the king, followed by a demand for cabinet ministers, and for the references of Church matters to an Assembly of Divines to be nominated by Parliament.

Charles flung his standards to the breeze. The House of Commons accepted the gage of battle. The war began. June 12, 1643, the Parliament passed an act entitled “An Ordinance of the Lords and Commons in Parliament for the calling of an Assembly of learned and godly divines and others, to be consulted with by the Parliament, for the settlement of the Government and Liturgy of the Church of England, and for the indicating and clearing of the doctrine of the said Church from false aspersions and interpretations.” The persons who were to constitute this Assembly were named in the ordinance. They embraced the finest representatives, with two or three possible exceptions, of the Church of the age. Subsequently about twenty-one ministers were added to make up for the absence of others. The original list contained one hundred and fifty-one names – the names of ten lords, twenty commoners, and one hundred and twenty-one divines – and included, in fair proportions, Moderate Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Independents, and Erastians.

In the original ordinance four bishops were named. Of the other Episcopalians called, five afterwards became bishops. But the Episcopalians mostly refused to attend, partly because the Assembly was not a regular convocation called by the king, and partly because he had expressly condemned the Solemn League and Covenant which, after the Assembly was a few weeks old, became a force determining the character of the work of the Assembly.

The Presbyterians formed the great majority of the Assembly and gained in numbers and influence as time passed. Of these there were two parties – one party holding to a jure humano theory of Presbyterianism, the other holding to the jure divino theory, i.e.,that government by Presbytery is "expressly instituted or commanded" in the New Testament as the proper polity of the Church. This latter party was powerfully reenforced by the Scottish commissioners to the Assembly who became debating, though not voting, members, after the adoption of the Solemn League and Covenant. The party won an essential triumph for the jure divino theory, a strong majority of all the Presbyterians coming to believe that the Lord Jesus is the sole King and Head of the Church, and has appointed a spiritual government in the hands of chosen representatives.

There were only five prominent Independents in the Assembly. They maintained that a local church should not be subject to the jurisdiction of presbyteries and synods, and that such a church has a right to ordain its own ministers.

The Erastians maintained the ecclesiastical supremacy of the civil government in all matters of discipline, and made the Church a department of the State – on the ground that clergymen are merely teachers, and that power of rule in the Church belongs to the civil magistrate. They were willing to concede a jure humano Presbyterianism, denied a jure divino form of Church government of any kind, and claimed for the State the right to give to the Church any form of government it might please to grant. These constituted a small party, but exercised vast influence because their views harmonized with those of Parliament.

It is to be remembered in this connection that the Long Parliament had the opportunity to select a body for the work of creed construction, fitter therefore than could have been found in any other age in England down to

this day, perhaps. Puritanism had been doing its work of making great men in England for a century. It has been aided in that work by all the mental and moral stimulus coming of geographical discovery, of the Great Reformation, of progress along every line of civilization, of advance in national well-being and prestige. The middle of the seventeenth century was, from a moral and spiritual point of view, the greatest age in the history of England to the present. Under the providence of God, the Long Parliament had the noblest age of England to chose the Assembly from; and it chose well as has appeared.

The Westminster Assembly was set to work, at first, on a revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles; but, on October 12, 1643, shortly after the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant, wherein, in order to secure Scottish aid against the king, Parliament had agreed to make the religions of England, Scotland, and Ireland as nearly uniform as possible and to reform religion "according to the Word of God, and the example of the best Reformed churches," Parliament directed the Assembly to "consider among themselves of such a discipline and government as may be most agreeable to God's holy word." Thereupon the Assembly entered at once upon the work of preparing a Directory of Government, Worship and Discipline. Delayed by much controversy with the Independent and Erastian members, they did not complete this portion of their work till near the end of 1644. Then they began work upon the Catechisms and Confession of Faith simultaneously. After progress with both, the Assembly resolved to finish the Confession of Faith first an then construct the Catechisms upon its model. December 3, 1646, they, in a body, presented the finished Confession to Parliament. Parliament recommitted the work that Scripture passages might be attached to every part of it. April 29, 1647, they reported it finished with full Scripture proofs of each separate proposition attached thereto.

The Shorter Catechism was completed and reported to Parliament, November 5, 1647, and the larger Catechism, April 14, 1648. March 22, 1648, the two Houses held a conference to compare their opinion about the Confession of Faith. Rushworth stated the result as follows: "The Commons this day, at a conference, presented the Lords with a Confession of Faith passed by them, with some alterations (especially concerning questions of discipline), viz: That they do agree with their Lordships, and so with the Assembly, in the doctrinal part, and desire the same may be made public, that this kingdom

and all the Reformed churches of Christendom, may see the Parliament of England differ not in doctrine."

It is plain from the preceding statements that the Westminster Standards were, in form, the standards of the Long Parliament. The Westminster Assembly was appointed by the Parliament. It was supported by that Parliament. Its acts were given validity, so far as political England was concerned, by enactment of that Parliament. The Westminster Assembly was a body called to advise that great Parliament as to the Biblical faith, polity, and worship. It is just as true, however, that the Parliament had taken care to constitute the Assembly of a body of men of uncommon abilities, learning, and godliness; just as true that it framed rules in accord with which the Assembly should do its work. These regulations indicated serious business for the Assembly, and the utmost freedom of discussion. They provided, amongst other things, "that every member, at his first entrance into the Assembly, shall make serious and solemn protestation not to maintain anything but what he believes to be the truth in sincerity, when discovered unto him"; "that what any man undertakes to prove as necessary, he shall make good out of the Scripture." The rules of procedure were read at the beginning of each week or month. So also was the following vow, framed in accord with one of the regulations: "I do seriously promise and vow in the presence of Almighty God, that in this Assembly, whereof I am a member, I will maintain nothing in the point of doctrine but what I believe to be most agreeable to the Word of God, nor in point of discipline, but what may make most for God's glory and the peace and good will of His Church." The Assembly not only enjoyed, it was encouraged to, the fullest freedom of debate, and to an endeavor to set forth the Bible faith, polity, and worship.

The Assembly had a wide acquaintance with creeds, Greek, Latin, Continental Reformed; but naturally; in accord with the Anglo-Saxon genius, it carried on the line of development begun on English soil in the Thirty-Nine Articles, continued by the framers of the Lambeth Articles (1595), continued further by Archbishop Usher, in the Irish Articles (1615), who was one of the greatest doctrinal Puritans of the time. While the creed of the Westminster Assembly shows striking likeness to the Irish Articles – probably intending thus to make clear its essential agreement with the doctrines of the English and Irish Reformation, it is far abler, fuller, and superior to any of its predecessors, and gives proof that the Assembly was steadily dominated by

its aim to state nothing therein which is not expressly taught in the Word of God, or derivable therefrom by good and necessary inference. Working thus it produced not only the most logical and most complete, but the most Biblical and the noblest creed ever yet produced in Christendom.

As soon as completed the Confession of Faith was brought to Scotland, and most favorably received. It was adopted by the Scottish General Assembly, August 27, 1647. The Scottish Parliament endorsed this action, February 7, 1690. In 1729, the old Synod of Philadelphia the first Presbyterian Synod in North America – in its famous "Adopting Act" adopted the Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms "as the Confessions of our Faith."

Although the Westminster Assembly excluded from their Confession everything they regarded as savoring of Erastianism, yet their views as to church establishments led them to concede power to the civil magistrates concerning religious things, which the fathers of American Presbyterianism would not concede. Hence in the "Adopting Act," just referred to, the Synod declared that it did not receive the clauses relating to this subject (some clauses in the twentieth and twenty- third chapters of the Confession)" in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to their exercise of ministerial authority; or power to persecute any for their religion; or, in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain." And, when the Synod was revising and amending its standards in 1787, preparatory to the organization of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., "it took into consideration the last paragraph of the twentieth chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith; the third paragraph of the twenty-third chapter, and the first paragraph of the thirty-first chapter; and, having made some alterations, agreed that the said paragraphs as now altered be printed for consideration." Thus altered and amended, the Confession and the Catechisms were adopted as the doctrinal part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and so remained till 1861. The Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1861 adopted the Standards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States in America.

During the course of the years from 1861 to 1973 the Presbyterian Church in the United States made a number of amendments to the Confession and Catechisms. Some of these changes were not acceptable to the group that

withdrew to form the Presbyterian Church in America. It was felt that the wisest course to be followed was to return to the original American form of the Confession and Catechisms with the two minor deletions mentioned in the Preface for the constitutional documents of the newly formed Church. In the providence of God, this was the identical form of the Confession and Catechisms adopted by the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, so that there were no changes in the doctrinal constitution required for that body to join with the Presbyterian Church in America in 1982.