

The Influence of the Westminster Confession of Faith on American Culture

Introduction

Martin Marty tells of a friend who began a speech by saying, “Every speaker should stick to his narrow field of specialization; mine is the existence of God, the nature of human being, and the meaning of life.”¹ Mercifully, my topic is not quite that large! John Leith has asked me to speak merely on the influence of the Westminster Confession of Faith on American culture.² Still, a couple of problems emerge which we need to address here at the outset.

First, we hear so frequently today about how bad American culture is that we who are recipients of, and adherents to, the Westminster Confession of Faith might want be wary of claiming credit for any influence on the culture. Robert Bork writes:

About the fact of rot and decadence there can be no dispute, except from those who deny that such terms have meaning, and who are, for that reason, major contributors to rot and decadence. We are accustomed to lamentations about American crime rates, the devastation wrought by drugs, rising illegitimacy, the decline of civility, and the increasing vulgarity of popular entertainment. But the manifestations of American cultural decline are even more widespread, ranging across virtually the entire society, from the violent underclass of the inner cities to our cultural and political elites, from rap music to literary studies, from pornography to law, from journalism to scholarship, from union halls to universities. Wherever one looks, the traditional virtues of this culture are being lost, its vices multiplied, its values degraded—in short, the culture itself is unraveling....

...Certainly, in the United States, we have never experienced a period of cultural depravity...to rival today’s condition....

...Country singer and social philosopher Merle Haggard...says that the decade of the 1960s “was just the evening of it all. I think we’re into the dead of night now.” Chances are, that is too optimistic and the dead of night still lies ahead. For the immediate future, in any event, what we probably face is an increasingly vulgar, violent, chaotic, and politicized culture.³

Bork’s point is well taken. Still, his premise has to be that America has had a good and strong culture from which we are falling away in the current decline. So, at the very least, we could look

¹John B. McGuire, in personal correspondence, quoting a speech opening often used by the late Art Hoppe, cited in Martin E. Marty, *Context: A Commentary on the Interaction of Religion and Culture* 27 (June 15, 1995):4.

²The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971) defines “culture” as: “The training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes, and manners; the condition of being thus trained and refined; the intellectual side of civilization.” *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (1977): “the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, speech, action, and artifacts and depends upon man’s capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.” The *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967): “the whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual, of a given society.” The *American Heritage Dictionary* (2d college ed., 1991): “The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population.”

³Robert H. Bork, “Hard Truths About the Culture War,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, no. 54 (June/July 1995), pp. 18, 22, 23.

for influences upon that remembered culture, and beyond that we could look for lines of continuing influence that extend into the strengths of the present culture and that perhaps even form a basis of good hope for the future.⁴

Second, certainly since H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, if not before, it has been a commonplace that the Reformed tradition has been eager to reform not only the church but also the larger world, regarding culture both as worthy of being transformed and as desperately needing to be transformed.⁵ To some extent, the tradition has succeeded in having an influence on the world, and that is what this study is about. Some argue that the culture has more transformed the church, and particularly that the American frontier has definitively shaped American religion. But Sydney Ahlstrom argues against them:

The creativeness of the frontier, or rather, the power of the frontier to alter or refashion whatever came into it, must not be exaggerated. Gothic cathedrals, to be sure, were delayed for a while and even Georgian meetinghouses had to bide their time. Churchly decorum was not easily found, although all of these marks of civilization were exhibited as soon as time, effort, and money would allow. Borderland and semi-wilderness, in other words, remained just that; and religion inescapably bore the impress of this actuality.

Far more remarkable than the primitive and rudimentary aspects of frontier religion was the persistence with which the thought, institutions, and practice of Europe and the settled East crossed the mountains and penetrated the life of the newly settled areas.... The continuing force of the Westminster Assembly behind all of these movements *defies calculation*.⁶

There's the nub of the second problem. On the one hand, he clearly means that the influence has been immense and obvious. On the other hand, he suggests—perhaps unintentionally—that the details are difficult or impossible to specify. That is, while the broad influences of certain major themes of the Reformation might be readily discernible, it might not be possible to assign to

⁴Cf. John H. Leith, "The Westminster Confession in American Presbyterianism," in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today: Papers Prepared for the Church of Scotland Panel on Doctrine*, ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1982), p. 95: "In the years since the Second World War, . . . the influence of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms has radically waned."

⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), p. 217; John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977, 1981), p. 198. See also Leith, "Calvinism," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 1280: "From the beginning Calvinists were activists engaged in transforming economic, political, and cultural life according to their vision of the Kingdom of God. Calvin sought the coming into being of the holy community in Geneva. The Calvinists carried this vision of the holy community, the embodiment of the purposes of God in society, to Scotland, to Puritan England, and to Massachusetts, where they went on an 'errand into the wilderness' to demonstrate the possibility of a Christian society. The Baptists and the Presbyterians embodied Calvinism's influence in the South."

⁶Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972, p. 453, emphasis added. See also Leith, "Calvinism," p. 1281: "The Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-47) was the authoritative summary of Calvinism for American Calvinists in Presbyterian, Baptist, and Congregational churches. It was also one of the most influential books of colonial America. The Shorter Catechism, a question-and-answer summary of the Westminster theology, was until World War II the basic text for the education of Presbyterian young people."

particular American cultural accomplishments the chapter and paragraph numbers from the Confession of Faith or its related documents—the Larger Catechism, the Shorter Catechism, the Directory for Publick Worship, and the Form of Presbyterian Church-Government—which I am including with it in this study. Moreover, correlation does not establish causality. We want to look for areas of demonstrable influence, not just apparent similarity.

Within these constraints, we will find that the Confession and the Catechisms have been among the primary instruments in carrying the Reformed tradition forward in this country, and they have made their contribution to the influence of the Reformed themes and emphases upon the culture. I will make some limited claims about the ways in which it has been discerned that the Westminster standards have influenced American culture, through the churches which have adopted them and through their members, especially in regard to government and politics, economics, education, and architecture.⁷

Part I: The Confession in the Church

QUEST. 1. *WHAT is the chief end of man?*

Ans. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

The Shorter Catechism⁸

Before we can assess the influence of the Westminster Confession of Faith on American culture, we would do well to explore its influence upon the churches which confessed it.⁹ That is, the glorification and enjoyment of God envisioned in the Shorter Catechism began to take place first in the worshipping congregations of the church. It was as the Westminster documents not only expressed the faith of these churches, but also shaped their faith and life, that the documents worked through the churches and their members to have an influence on the larger culture.

Ahlstrom provides valuable background in this regard:

Taken together, these Westminster standards constitute one of the classic formulations of Reformed theology. That so many learned and contentious men in an age of so much theological hair-splitting could with so little coercion establish so resounding a consensus on so detailed a doctrinal statement is one of the marvels of the century. Nor were these formulations forgotten amid wars and violence; they remain normative in Scotland and their immense influence on the thought and practice of American Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists makes them by far the most important

⁷Leith, *Introduction*, p. 198-221, has explored seven areas in which the tradition has influenced culture: visual arts, literature, architecture, music, political order, economic order, and learning. In several of these, the instances he gives occur in Europe instead of America, and/or they predate the Westminster Assembly. We will not be able to take up the related question of how the culture may have influenced the churches and even the revisions of the Confession itself in America, though it seems clear that the quest for religious liberty, the experience of revivalism, and changing patterns of marriage and divorce have had their impact on the churches and their official statements of faith.

⁸*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994, p. 287.

⁹Paul K. Conkin, *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 36: "Briefly, during the Long Parliament (beginning in 1640), Anglicans of all types, including Puritans and Presbyterians, united in a common confession (the Westminster). They already shared the authorized English translation of the Bible (today often called the King James Version). These two works subsequently became the most influential documents in American Christianity."

confessional witness in American colonial history. Insusceptible to brief summary, they and the derivative confessions deserve close attention from any student of early American Protestantism.¹⁰

That is, the Confession was not a dead letter but a lively document, guiding the faith and practice of these churches and of their members. More specifically:

...[V]arious influences converged in the Westminster Assembly and made its historic declarations the most definitive covenantal confession in post-Reformation history. As followed or adapted by later groups and churches, the Westminster Confession would become by far the most influential doctrinal symbol in American Protestant history....Adherence to the doctrines of the Westminster Assembly was attested at the Cambridge Synod of the New England Puritans in 1648. In 1680 the Massachusetts "Reforming Synod" and in 1708 the Connecticut Saybrook Synod adopted explicitly that version of Westminster formulated by the English Independents in 1658 and published as the Savoy Declaration. Westminster was also adapted by the English Baptists in 1677, and in 1707 this London Confession was adopted by the immensely influential Philadelphia Association of Baptists in America. The unaltered Westminster Confession (and Catechism) were made normative for the Church of Scotland in 1689, and in due course for American Presbyterians as well.¹¹

In fact, the "Presbyterians who had used the documents from the beginning made them the official standards of the Church in the Adopting Act of 1729."¹²

Gregg Singer writes of the influence of Westminster not only on the churches as such but especially on the members of the churches:

The Scotch-Irish in America remained strict Calvinists. The records of individual congregations, as well as those of the presbyteries, indicate that they had a general requirement for all young people to memorize the Shorter Catechism, while the Larger Catechism was to be a part of the curriculum of study. Many members were trained in the Westminster Confession of Faith....

Scotch-Irish Presbyterianism was characterized by its control over the lives of its members and covenant children....As unwelcome as it would be today, even in Presbyterian congregations, it was this discipline that toughened the fiber of the Scotch-Irish and made Presbyterianism a force within American Christianity and the nation, far beyond what its numerical strength would warrant.¹³

¹⁰Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, p. 94.

¹¹Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, p. 131 and note 5. See also p. 266: "[T]he importance of Scotland's church for America was immeasurably increased. Its integrated and firmly established system of doctrine and order became extremely influential in the English Reformation during the decade after 1640, especially at the Westminster Assembly, whose formularies of doctrine, worship, and polity were enforced in both kingdoms—temporarily in England, to the present day in Scotland. After the Restoration (1660) Presbyterianism lost its vitality in England, but through force of example and by immigration, the Scottish church in later years became a very powerful influence in America."

¹²Leith, "Westminster Confession," p. 95. The Philadelphia Association of Baptists further modified the standards and first published the results in 1742.

¹³C. Gregg Singer, "The Scotch Irish in America," in *John Calvin*, ed. Reid, pp. 280-81.

Part II: Perspective

THEY who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them.

The Westminster Confession of Faith 13.1¹⁴

We are not the first to raise the question of the influence of the Westminster Confession of Faith on American culture. To gain perspective on our task, we would do well to hear Francis Beattie, Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. One-hundred years ago, he made a broad and unabashedly optimistic estimation of the influence of the Westminster Standards on American culture:

[T]he application of the contents of the Standards to individual, domestic and national life produces the highest and most beneficent results. The individual man who is consciously a freeman in Christ, and who enjoys the liberty wherewith Christ makes his people free, can never be a coward or a slave; and he whose life is framed according to the ethical rules of the Standards will be found glorifying God in his body, soul and spirit as his reasonable service.

In the case of the home, he that follows the teaching of the Standards in regard to the duties of the domestic circle, whether it be those of parents or those of children, will find that the home life is properly regulated. Hence it is that wherever this teaching has prevailed, and regulated domestic life, that life is seen at its very best. Nowhere is the home so sacred and its life so pure as in those communities in which the doctrines of the Standards have been believed, and their ethical teaching observed in the family circle. History and observation abundantly confirm this position.

In regard to national life, the same thing is true on a larger scale. The teaching of the Standards in regard to civil government balances in a fitting manner the largest degree of individual liberty, and the necessary measure of control requisite for free yet stable national life and action... Those whose spirit is tempered by the teaching of the Standards cannot long be the subjects of oppression, nor will they, if in the place of authority and power, be the instruments of tyranny. History abundantly confirms this on both sides. Presbyterians, as a matter of fact, have always been the friends of freedom and the foes of oppression. Again and again they have fought the world's battle for religious and civil liberty. This is the result not merely of the doctrines and ethics of the system which the Standards unfold, but also of the clear manner in which the provinces of church and state are marked out. The sphere of each is plainly prescribed, and the true basis of the nature and ends of civil government is laid down, so that neither is allowed to usurp the functions or invade the sphere of the other. Hence it is that those branches of the church which have been moulded by the true reformed doctrine contained in the Standards, and which have been permeated with its spirit, have led the van in the world's onward progress in intelligence, morality and self-government. They have been the pioneers in all that goes to lift up mankind to its divine ideal, and to supply it with a lofty motive to live for the glory of God and the welfare of men the world over....

Two hundred and fifty years have passed away since the Westminster Assembly met and did its noble work. During these years the world has seen wonderful changes, and the human race has, in various ways, made remarkable progress. Civil liberty has in many lands been planted on a sure foundation, intellectual activity has gained much splendid renown, commercial energy has conquered many an unexplored region, and missionary zeal has reached out to the ends of the earth. How much of this is due to the silent and

¹⁴*Westminster Confession of Faith*, p. 61.

salutary operation of the Reformed doctrine, polity and ethics can scarcely be estimated. The verdict of history tells the splendid story. And to-day, the world over, there are many millions of people who accept the system of Reformed doctrine and Presbyterian polity of which the Standards are such a complete exposition.¹⁵

These claims are remarkable. On the one hand, they may seem plausible, or adherents to the Confession might want to find them plausible, at least partly because the absence of such visible consequences would raise severe questions about the usefulness and applicability of the documents. On the other hand, we might wish that Beattie had named names and given dates and places for examples of such well framed individuals, regulated homes, believing communities, brave citizens, and just authorities. Moreover, that of which he speaks may have been largely undone in the last one-hundred years.

Nevertheless, Beattie is by no means alone. McDowell Richards wrote fifty years ago, "It is the glory of the Presbyterian system as set forth by the Westminster divines that it has produced citizens of intelligence, of integrity, of courage."¹⁶ Ahlstrom, writing one-quarter a century ago, is no less expansive than Beattie on the impact of Westminster:

The best clues to the animating spirit of this [Reformed] movement are the confessions which its leaders formulated, defended, and died for:...most detailed of all, the formularies issued by the Westminster Assembly in Great Britain (1643-45). The themes that run so consistently through these great confessions and the writings of their chief expositors deserve reiteration; for they are ideas which had an enormous impact on subsequent history. For the United States they were to become a powerful *culture-forming influence*.¹⁷

He then sets forth five themes: the sovereignty of God, which "led men away from sentimentalism, triviality, and all efforts to cajole the Almighty"; human depravity and double predestination, which heightened the desire for assurance and therefore paved the way for religious "enthusiasm"; the revealed Law of God, which applied to the reform of the churches and to personal behavior, as an explicit guide for human morality; the control, discipline, conversion, and reorganization of society and institutions, according to the Reformed leaders' understanding of the Law of God; and the enlivening of an Old Testament world view, especially "the Puritan determination to make God's revealed Law and the historical example of Israel an explicit basis for ordering the affairs of men in this world, and their conviction that this could be done to God's glory by specific colonial commonwealths or even by an entire nation."¹⁸ In all of these ways, the great themes of the Reformed tradition, especially as articulated in the Westminster Confession, have influenced American culture.

¹⁵Francis R. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, Richmond, Virginia: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1896, pp. 408-09, 420. See also p. 420: "Generic Calvinism is not dying out, nor shall it be allowed to die. Its noble history, often bathed in tears and baptized with blood; its deep philosophy of the facts of nature, of providence, and of grace; and its absolute submission to the will of God as made known in the Scriptures, guarantee its vitality and efficiency till time shall be no more, and grace be fully crowned in glory."

¹⁶J. McDowell Richards, "The Contribution of the Westminster Assembly to Democracy," *Union Seminary Review* 54 (November 1943):341.

¹⁷Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, pp. 78-79, emphasis added.

¹⁸Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, pp. 79-81.

Part III: Government and Politics

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing contrary to His Word; or beside it, if [sic; read “in”] matters of faith or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, 20.2¹⁹

This brief evangelical insight has had a profound impact not only on the churches but also on the people and the governments and politics of the countries where the churches are. It was originally intended to limit the ability of the church to bind the consciences of its members in requiring obedience to its teachings in matters of faith and worship. Of course, the documents elsewhere specify different duties for church and state. But I believe that it was this particular insight, that God alone is Lord of the conscience, that led to a particular attitude among the people that spilled over into the realm of government and politics. Not only is the church not Lord of the conscience, but neither is the state Lord of the conscience, nor are the particular persons occupying the positions of authority in the state Lord of the conscience. Though the original Westminster Confession conceived of state churches, this insight helped fuel the cause for seeking religious liberty as expressed through churches that were independent of the state. It also has importance for limiting the scope and authority of government and for de-absolutizing the state.

James Hastings Nichols has written of this:

In a memorable act of 1729 the colonial [Presbyterian] church had adopted as its own the Westminster Confession of Faith, together with a declaratory statement that radically revised the Confession in matters of church and state. As is well known, the Confession had originally been devised for the established church of the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland. For them it provided that “the Civil magistrate...hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order...that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruption and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered and observed.”...

When the colonial Presbyterians came to adopt the Confession, however, they rejected this whole theocratic view of church and state. The Synod declared unanimously in 1729 that they did not adopt the Westminster Confession to acknowledge in the civil magistrate a controlling power over synods, or “power to persecute any for their religion.”...Colonial Presbyterianism...from its first official action in these matters, declared for the independence of the church from the state and for the religious liberty of all individuals.²⁰

¹⁹*Westminster Confession of Faith*, p. 86.

²⁰James Hastings Nichols, “John Witherspoon on Church and State,” in *Calvinism and the Political Order: Essays Prepared for the Woodrow Wilson Lectureship of The National Presbyterian Center, Washington, D.C.*, George L. Hunt, ed., John T. McNeill, consulting ed., Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965, pp. 135-36. This was originally given as a lecture at the 175th General Assembly of The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Iowa (May 20, 1963). We might note that the colonial amendments to the Confession, limiting the authority of the civil magistrate over the church, depicted the magistrates as “nursing fathers,” an unusual, gender-bending term.

The interesting thing for our purposes is that the impetus to modify the Westminster Confession so as to separate the church from the state can itself be understood to be based in the Confession's own concern for liberty. As Nichols writes, "Is there a better place to begin than with the declaration of the Westminster Assembly, 'God alone is Lord of the conscience'?"²¹

Lest we think we claim too much for the influence of the Westminster Confession of Faith as an expression of the Reformed tradition on the emerging government of the United States of America, we must remember that the Reformed tradition was "the religious heritage of three-fourths of the American people in 1776....[T]he religious foundations of colonial life were a powerful factor in American development. Few cultures are so intractable to purely secular categories of historical interpretation."²² The people of that day were well aware of the significance of the Reformed heritage:

When Joseph Galloway, friend of Franklin and eminent Philadelphian, gave testimony before a committee of the House of Commons in 1779, he was asked what was the underlying cause of the revolution. He replied that it was the activity and influence of the Presbyterians.²³

In our own day, we must ask whether this de-absolutizing influence has been carried a step farther or even too far. It is one thing, in a Christian setting, to say that neither church nor state is absolute, since God alone is Lord of the conscience. It is quite another thing, in a secular society which denies belief in God, to say that there are no absolutes, which merely comes to mean that no one and nothing is absolute over me. This expresses and contributes to the radical individualism with which we are all too familiar. At one very simple and practical level, it ignores the continuing reality power of death, an easily observable absolute in this world. And of course, we must ask what kind of society, if any, can continue to exist in the face of such belligerent anti-social sentiments and commitments.

Again, we might find help from the Confession in establishing governmental and legal constraints for individual behavior:

The Reformed insistence that the laws of the nation conform to the natural law as interpreted by Christians...was in harmony with their interpretation of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. Religious liberty, as the right to worship God according to the dictates of Scripture and conscience, did not also free one from the laws of God. While the theological debates within Reformed denominations sometimes seemed acute, there was no instance of disagreement on that part of the Westminster Confession that read, "The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified as others, to the obedience thereof; and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the creator who gave it."²⁴

²¹Nichols, "Witherspoon," p. 139. See also A. Mervyn Davies, *Foundation of American Freedom*, New York and Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1955, p. 234: "The great affirmation of their Westminster Confession, 'God alone is lord [sic; read "Lord"] of the conscience,' no longer meant for them, as it had in the past, only that they must resist requirements of obedience to unscriptural rules regarding faith and worship. It now meant that they should resist compulsion of any kind in matters of conscience, for themselves and others."

²²Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, p. 350.

²³Davies, *Foundation*, p. 227.

²⁴Fred J. Hood, *Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837* (University, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), p. 101. The quote comes chapter 19, paragraph 5. See *Westminster Confession of Faith*, pp. 81-82: "The moral law doth for ever bind

Another way in which the Westminster Confession of Faith may have had an influence on democratic government, or where there is at least a correlation, stems from Chapter 9, "Of Free Will."²⁵ There we find the Augustinian and Calvinist insight of the continuing reality of sin in the lives not only of the fallen but even of the converted. This makes the limiting of the power of individuals, the sharing of power within legislative bodies, and especially the balancing of power among distinct branches of government, crucial. In this century, Reinhold Niebuhr has expressed it well: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."²⁶

In making an analysis of how Puritan belief and piety fit into a full historical account of American democracy, three major aspects of the democratic tradition may be distinguished: the institutions of democracy, the ideals and theories of democracy, and the sense of civic responsibility which animates the citizenry and the magistracy. Ahlstrom thinks that claims about Puritan impact in the first two areas, of institutions and theories, must be very modest. It is in the third, moral attitudes, that he sees the most important contribution. That is, the desire and commitment to fulfill one's calling, not only religiously and economically, but also civilly and politically, has most helpfully undergirded the American democratic accomplishment.²⁷

Others, even standing outside the Protestant, Reformed, and Presbyterian tradition, have discerned the important contributions of this time and place in the life of the Reformed church to the larger political realm:

Distinguished Anglicans such as William Temple and R. H. Tawney, as well as Roman Catholics like Lord Acton and Christopher Dawson, have accounted Puritanism to be the most potent force in the shaping of modern Anglo-American democracy.... "The connection is seen most clearly in America where the Congregationalist Calvinism of New England, which was a parallel development to the independent Puritanism of Old England, developing from the same roots in a different environment, leads on directly to the assertion of the Rights of Man in the Constitution of the North American states and to the rise of political democracy."²⁸

Part IV: Economics

Q. 140. *Which is the eighth commandment?*

A. The eighth commandment is, *Thou shalt not steal.*

Q. 141. *What are the duties required in the eighth commandment?*

all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it."

²⁵*Westminster Confession of Faith*, pp. 51-53.

²⁶Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944, 1960), p. xiii.

²⁷Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Puritan Ethic and the Spirit of American Democracy," in *Calvinism and the Political Order*, eds. George L. Hunt and John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), pp. 96-104.

²⁸James Hastings Nichols, *Democracy and the Churches* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), pp. 29-30, quoting Christopher Dawson, "Religious Origins of European Disunity," *Dublin Review*, October, 1940, pp. 151 f., 153 f.

A. The duties required in the eighth commandment are, truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to every one his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof; giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others; moderation of our judgments, wills, and affections concerning worldly goods; a provident care and study to get, keep, use, and dispose these things which are necessary and convenient for the sustentation of our nature, and suitable to our condition; a lawful calling, and diligence in it; frugality; avoiding unnecessary lawsuits, and suretiship, or other like engagements; and an endeavour, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own.

The Larger Catechism²⁹

This document clearly advances into the New World the Protestant Reformation's high regard for vocation, integrity, hard work, and responsibility for the accumulated wealth which sometimes results from these. No longer are priests the only true Christians. Believers can live Christian lives and glorify God through good and honest work in any honorable vocation. This high regard for work and an emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility have had a clear and profound influence on the development of capitalism in America.³⁰

When this doctrine of vocation is combined with that of predestination, an emphasis on simplicity, and a commitment to glorify God, more remarkable results are obtained, even in the most difficult situations. Leith has given us an example:

The influence of the Reformed theology and ethics may also be seen in the simple development of Presbyterian (Scotch-Irish) cultures in the piedmont areas of the southern United States. The Scotch-Irish who settled the piedmont district of South Carolina were desperately poor, so poor that their poverty was confused with ignorance and immorality by an Episcopal priest from plantation society in the Deep South. They slept on dirt floors in one-room shacks; yet they set about on their own to build churches and schools. They developed a culture with a high sense of personal honesty and of responsibility for every person's taking care of himself and his own. They helped their neighbors, but they did not want charity. Even the aristocracy, when it developed, cherished simplicity and disavowed the pompous, the conspicuous, and the contrived. This plain but remarkable cultural achievement came about in spite of original poverty and in spite of the devastation of the Civil War. The indispensable factor in this achievement was the heritage of the Reformation and of Puritanism.³¹

Again, one of the primary instruments for preserving and carrying forward that heritage in this nation was the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The significance of the impact of the Reformed tradition upon the economy of the United States of America as a whole might be comprehended more fully when contrasted with the very different kind of impact that other traditions have had on other economies in this hemisphere. John Updike writes, in an almost surprised tone, of precisely this contrast:

Calvinist fatalism seems to act, paradoxically, as a spur to enterprise; surely one of the curious features of New World development is that a Protestant nation dominated by believers in an inflexible and inscrutable predestination should have proved so dynamic,

²⁹*Westminster Confession of Faith*, pp. 225-27.

³⁰See, for example, Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

³¹Leith, *Introduction*, pp. 218-19.

while former Iberian colonies under the influence of a Catholic system of mediatory works should have proved relatively torpid.³²

Of course, the “Calvinist fatalism” of which he writes is precisely the doctrine of predestination which was carried into this country in the third chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith, entitled “Of God’s Eternal Decree,” which begins: “GOD from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”³³ This great and sure confidence has not suppressed life, but instead has given it new energy and vision.

Part V: Education

Beside publick reading of the holy scriptures, every person that can read, is to be exhorted to read the scriptures privately, (and all others that cannot read, if not disabled by age, or otherwise, are likewise to be exhorted to learn to read,) and to have a Bible.

The Directory for the Publick Worship of God³⁴

It is well known that Reformed Christians in particular have valued education and cherished learning. This is frequently attributed to obedience to that portion of the Great Commandment which says that we are to love the Lord our God with all our mind. An even more direct encouragement is found in this admonition from the Directory for the Publick Worship of God.

One way that this influence is seen was in the construction of schools alongside churches. Another most important aspect of this influence has to do with the curriculum.

A young colonist’s education in New England was provided by a very limited curriculum, consisting of three books in addition to the Bible: the *Hornbook*, the *New England Primer*, and the *Bay Psalm Book*. The *Hornbook* consisted of a single piece of parchment, covered with a transparent substance attached to a paddle-shaped piece of wood. The alphabet, the Lord’s Prayer, and religious doctrines were written or printed on the parchment.

In 1690 the first edition of the *New England Primer* appeared... The *Primer* expanded the religious themes [of the *Hornbook*] by including the names of the Old and New Testament books, the Lord’s Prayer, “An Alphabet of Lessons for Youth,” the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, [and] the Westminster Assembly Shorter Catechism.³⁵

³²John Updike, *New Yorker* (October 30, 1995), cited in Martin E. Marty, *Context: A Commentary on the Interaction of Religion and Culture* 28 (February 1, 1996):1-2.

³³*Westminster Confession of Faith*, p. 28.

³⁴*Westminster Confession of Faith*, p. 376.

³⁵Gary DeMar, *America’s Christian History: The Untold Story*, Atlanta, Georgia: American Vision Inc., 1993, 1995, pp. 99-100.

This *Primer* constituted the main text for primary education for Protestants in the colonies and in the eastern United States until the first quarter of the nineteenth century.³⁶

In addition to building schools and writing curriculum for students to learn to read, the churches also soon built institutions of higher education, particularly for the training of ministers, but also for the education of others to participate in church and society. Though the founding of what became Harvard University by the New England Puritans predates the Confession by a decade, this declaration is indicative of the attitude in these communities:

After God had carried us safe to New England, and we had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for Gods worship, and settled the civil government, One of the next things we longed for, and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity, dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches when our present ministers lie in the dust.³⁷

Even more interesting for our purposes is what was done when it was perceived that Harvard was no longer fulfilling this purpose for the Reformed community:

By the eighteenth century, a growing number of New England colonists believed that Harvard had drifted from its original course. Increase Mather, president of Harvard from 1685 to 1701, and his son Cotton Mather, had hoped they could prevent Harvard from moving away from its original Calvinist orientation. They failed. Harvard not only moved beyond Calvinism to Arminianism but drifted on to Unitarianism. To remedy these theological shortcomings, Yale College was established in 1701 in Connecticut. "The founders of Yale required the 'Westminster Confession to be diligently read in the Latin Tongue and well studyed [sic] by all the Schollars,' 'for the upholding of the Christian protestant Religion by a succession of Learned and Orthodox men.' The State of Connecticut in the Tale [sic; read "Yale"] Charter of 1701 asserted its desire to support 'so necessary and Religious an undertaking.'"³⁸

Of course, there were many other colleges founded by adherents to the Westminster Confession and by the Presbyterian Church.

Beginning with the founding of the Log College in 1726 and continuing with the founding of the College of New Jersey twenty years later, Presbyterianism inaugurated a noble tradition in American educational affairs.

...In many of the colonies academies were established, such as Liberty Hall in Virginia by William Graham, now Washington and Lee University. Virginia Presbyterians also established Hampden Sydney College in 1776. Although many of these schools have lost

³⁶Gaius Jackson Slosser, *The History of the Westminster Assembly Standards, 1643-1652: Chronological Outline Including Origins, Criticisms, and Appreciations*, 1943, p. 21. For a disturbing counterpoint, see an essay by Thomas J. Davis, "Images of Intolerance: John Calvin in Nineteenth-Century History Textbooks." Davis argues that "the foundation for Calvin's use as a rhetorical negative was laid throughout the nineteenth century in the way he was presented in the school history textbooks," and that "Calvin came to represent, in his very name, a method of labeling broader traditions the broader American republic repudiated; indeed, Calvin came to stand for things unAmerican."

³⁷Robert Mather, "New England's First Fruits" in *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. Perry Miller (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1956), p. 323, cited in Leith, *Introduction*, p. 220.

³⁸DeMar, *America's Religious History*, pp. 104-05.

their Presbyterian identity and have deserted the faith that gave them birth and so long nurtured them, we should not close our eyes to the fact that these institutions played a very important role in the formation of the American character and provided a great many leaders for both church and nation over the years.³⁹

Before the Civil War, in a time of scarce financial resources, Presbyterians built forty-nine colleges and the Congregationalists built twenty-one.⁴⁰

Closely related to the emphasis on the life of the mind was a similar emphasis on the task of the minister as teacher and preacher. The Calvinist sermon not only proclaimed the gospel, but also educated people in logical, coherent thought and discourse. Important southern colleges, such as Davidson and Rhodes, founded by Presbyterians reflect this strong belief in education.⁴¹

Some of these colleges no longer exist, and others have become major state universities with no relation to the church whatsoever. Still, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today counts sixty-eight colleges and universities as Presbyterian, as well as eleven theological schools. Adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith has carried with it a strong commitment to education and has had a profound influence on education in this nation.⁴²

Within this area of education, and particularly of learning to read, it is appropriate to note that some have seen an influence of the Reformed tradition in general, and the Westminster

³⁹Singer, "The Scotch Irish," p. 284. William Graham did not actually start Liberty Hall. The Presbytery of Hanover, desiring to establish a seminary, assumed responsibility for an existing school being operated by the Reverend John Brown, another Presbyterian pastor. See Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. 1: 1607-1861 (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 80. The author is a descendant of Brown.

⁴⁰Donald G. Tewksbury, *The Founding of American Colleges and Universities Before the Civil War* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Columbia University, 1932), p. 90, cited in Leith, *Introduction*, p. 220.

⁴¹Leith, "Calvinism," p. 1280.

⁴²Conversely, where education has not been valued or available, the Confession has been modified or abandoned. See Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, pp. 444-45: "As legatees of a monumental dogmatic tradition, Presbyterians were committed to a concept of education and instruction. The doctrinal system of the Westminster formularies was ill-adapted to the simplifications of frontier preaching; it demanded a genuinely "teaching church," a catechetical system, sustained preaching, and a well-educated ministry.... [T]he Cumberland Presbytery...was excised from the Synod of Kentucky on account of its revivalism, its waiving of traditional educational requirements for the ministry in order to meet more quickly the region's religious needs, and its growing tendency to depart from the Westminster standards (especially in regard to divine sovereignty and human ability)...They adopted a revised, Arminian version of the Westminster Confession. See also p. 466, and note 5: "[O]n the American frontier they were unquestionably embarrassed to confront their untutored hearers with the baroque intricacies of Westminster....By 1906, when the main body of Cumberland Presbyterians was reunited with its parent body, the Northern Presbyterian Church in effect committed itself to Arminianism." Cf. pp. 844-45: "In 1906, upon receiving back the Cumberland Presbyterians after a century of separation on this issue, the Presbyterian Church (North) formally revised the Westminster Confession to an Arminian reading....As God's predestinating decrees passed from favor, the floodgates of emotionalism and sentimentality in religion were opened....Revivalism, in other words, was a mighty engine of doctrinal destruction."

Confession in particular, on literature, especially southern literature, where it is often characterized as “Puritanism”. For instance:

Faulkner, it is plain, resents the Puritan emphasis on sober living and strict Sabbath observance, its frowning upon the pleasures of conviviality, and its tendencies toward spiritual pride and self-righteousness. Though he is capable on occasion of discerning in a Puritan service a fine simplicity and moral integrity...on the whole, Faulkner is appalled at the grim constrictions of Puritanism even when he is not enraged by its spiritual aggressions. But Faulkner seems to share with Puritanism one cardinal belief: the sense of the importance of the human will...Man must gain his salvation by individual effort—by an agonizing wrestle with the angel.
...Man defines himself through his striving...Man cannot simply vegetate—cannot simply be. He must become, and he will become what he ought to be largely through his own effort.⁴³

Much of this appropriation is not only negative but is also distorted in its comprehension or expression of the doctrines. Nevertheless, the Westminster Confession has had a significant influence on literature, even as that literature has struggled against it.

Part VI: Architecture

Q. 155. *How is the word made effectual to salvation?*

A. The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.

The Larger Catechism⁴⁴

The churches built by the heirs of the Protestant Reformation, especially those which expressed most faithfully the convictions of the Westminster documents, were primarily places for the preaching and hearing of the Word of God, and only secondarily for the administration of the sacraments. As Leith has written:

The New England meeting house also can be described as a classic statement of Reformed theology in architecture. The Puritan churches were simple with geometrically rational designs. They were particularly suited to the preaching and hearing of the word of God.⁴⁵

Paul Tillich, speaking about the influence of Baroque mysticism on church architecture, made this observation:

The development of light in the churches is very interesting. Slowly the daylight replaced the light that is broken through stained-glass windows. The daylight is not the

⁴³Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963, pp. 45-46.

⁴⁴*Westminster Confession of Faith*, pp. 247-48.

⁴⁵Leith, *Introduction*, p. 210.

outburst of Divine light but rational light by which one can read and the congregation can see one another.⁴⁶

This insight applies to the development of light in the New England meeting houses, picking up both the emphases of an educated congregation and of the fellowship of the gathered, covenant community.

For our purposes, the point is this: “Architecture is determined not only by the accidental facts of history but also by theology.”⁴⁷

When the 17th century was well advanced, a recognised type of church building evolved, of which a fine example is the Old Ship Meeting-House in Hingham, Massachusetts (1680). “It is the Puritan meeting-house to the last nail and shingle. Gaunt and bare, it ‘lieth four square’ to its God and to the sea. Its framing trim and nautical, its lines ‘ship-shape and Bristol fashion,’ the look-out on top, and the utter absence of the softer amenities of architecture, bear out the tradition that its builders were sea-faring as well as God-fearing.”⁴⁸

By the middle of the 18th century...a high standard of church architecture was reached...The New England meeting house is rectangular, its horizontal lines being corrected by the upward thrust of the steeple. Its white timber is in keeping with the rest of the village, yet it is clearly a House of Prayer. Apart from the steeple, there is scarcely a trace of Christian symbolism. Yet the New England meeting-house is essentially a parish church, the ecclesiastical counterpart of the democratic town hall. It is the centre of the town’s religion, a civic expression of its faith.⁴⁹

All of this is to say again that the Westminster Confession of Faith has had a significant influence on American culture, in this instance particularly on architecture. The beliefs articulated in the Confession lead to certain kinds of worship and to the construction of certain kinds of places for that worship.

The New England churches do not exhaust the possibilities of Christian imagination in architecture, but they do express certain aspects of Reformed theology with a clarity that justifies their designation as classic examples of the embodiment of Reformed faith and churchmanship in architecture.⁵⁰

Conversely, in our own day, it seems difficult to find Presbyterian congregations which study or teach the Confession and the Catechisms and, at the same time, difficult to find church buildings which reflect their themes and doctrines. Too often today we find divided chancels, with separate lecterns and pulpits, driving a wedge between the word of God read and the word of God preached; we find massive, central communion tables and diminutive pulpits, as if the Lord’s

⁴⁶Paul Tillich, in “Theology and Architecture,” in *Architectural Forum* (December 1955), p. 134, cited in Leith, *Introduction*, p. 210. Tillich expressed his preference for tinted windows producing broken, mystical light.

⁴⁷Leith, *Introduction*, p. 210.

⁴⁸Andrew Landale Drummond, *The Church Architecture of Protestantism: An Historical and Constructive Study* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1934), p. 52, quoting T. E. Tallmadge, F.A.I.A., *Architecture in America*, p. 43.

⁴⁹Drummond, *Church Architecture*, pp. 53-55.

⁵⁰Leith, *Introduction*, p. 210.

Supper were more important than the preaching of the gospel; we find the Lord's Table cluttered with candlesticks and offering plates, as if it were an altar instead of a table, and as if our supposed sacrifices there mattered more than the grace of God in the once for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross; and we find far too much ostentatious display of wealth, unbecoming of those nurtured in the Reformed tradition. We cannot possibly hope for the Westminster Confession of Faith to have any continuing influence on the larger American culture in which we find ourselves if the so-called Reformed churches are not better guided by it in their own faith, life, worship, practice, and even architecture.

Conclusion

The particular claims that I have made about the influence of the Westminster Confession of Faith on American culture—in the areas of government and politics, economics, education, and architecture—are modest. Nevertheless, the Confession and its related documents, as full and careful articulations of the faith of the Reformed tradition, and as the primary instruments for carrying that heritage into this land, have undoubtedly had a profound influence upon American culture, even though it is difficult to specify. We would do well to end with Leith's observation about the cultural impact of that larger Reformed heritage which the Confession embodies:

The great Reformed theologians and churchmen did not originally set out to enrich culture. Their work was the interpretation and application of the word of God and leadership in the life of the church. Yet in performing these functions with integrity and competence, they mightily shaped culture. . . . Indeed, many of the most precious qualities of social, political, and cultural life in the United States are inconceivable apart from the heritage of the Protestant Reformation and of the Reformed tradition, including, in particular, English Puritanism.⁵¹

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⁵¹Leith, *Introduction*, p. 221. See also Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, p. 1079: "[T]he exploration and settlement of those parts of the New World in which the United States took its rise were profoundly shaped by the Reformed and Puritan impulse, and . . . this impulse, through its successive transmutations, remained the dominant factor in the ideology of the Protestant Establishment. To that tradition, moreover, all other elements among the American people—Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Jewish, infidel, red, yellow, and black—had in some way, negatively or positively, to relate themselves."