

Theology of the Westminster Standards

Week 01 – Introduction: Historical Context and Course of Study

30,000 ft Overview of Church History to the Reformation

The New Testament Church

- Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, (beginning of) Session, Pentecost, Apostolic mission (Acts 1:8 – Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Ends of the Earth).
- Church dealt largely with Jewish persecution and much of the New Testament concerns itself with the significance of Christ and the church in relation to salvation history (Jew/Gentile).

70AD to 300AD – Early Church

- Church dealt largely with Pagan/Roman persecution.
- What is the **real** threat of the Christian church?
- Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (~155AD)
 - Written to Emperor Antoninus Pius to defend Christianity against false accusations.
 - Not a real threat: Christians were accused of cannibalism (Eucharist) and incest ("Brother/sister in Christ")
 - A real threat: "Jesus is Lord"
- Apostle's Creed
- Heavy persecution under Emperor Diocletian In 3rd c.

300-700AD – Established Church, Crumbling Empire

- By the 4th c. Pagan religion is largely powerless to sustain a hollowing Roman empire.
- The Edict of Milan (318AD) Constantine outlaws the persecution of Christians
- Council of Nicaea (325AD) orthodox Christology established in opposition to Arius
- As Christianity is established societally and theologically in the 4th c., the Roman Empire (in the west) is crumbling.
- Saint Augustine writes *The City of God* (426AD) in response to the sacking of Rome by the Visigoths in 410AD.
 - Augustine responds to the Criticism that the establishment of Christianity and the waning of pagan worship is the cause of Rome's collapse.
- As Rome crumbles, Christianity carries forward as the basis of European society/culture in the Medieval era.
- 500s to 800s "Dark Ages" if you want to give a period of European history that title.

700-1500AD – Medieval Europe

- Characterized by the growth of the Roman Catholic Church.
- Positively, the church acted as a true prophetic voice with real societal power against tyranny in the civil realm.
- Also positively, the church carried forward the theology of the church regarding the atonement (Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*) & in the doctrine of God (Theology Proper) (Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* & *Summa Contra Gentiles*) (Anselm, *Proslogion*)

- Negatively, the church increasingly functioned apart from the people of God in several ways:
 - Sacerdotalism: *ex opere operato*, transubstantiation, etc.
 - Intensification of distinction between laity & the priestly class.
 - Indulgences
- What protestants typically ascribe to the Catholic church in Medieval Europe is concentrated in the 14th-16th centuries.

The Protestant Reformation

- While there were precursors to the Reformation (John Huss in Bohemia & John Wycliffe in Britain) Martin Luther nailing the 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.
- 15th & 16th c. in Europe was a wild time!
 - 1450s – Italian Renaissance (Culture)
 - 1492 – Columbus sails the ocean blue » Age of Discovery (Geopolitics)
 - 1517 – Protestant Reformation (Religion)
 - 1560s – Galileo and the Scientific Revolution (Science)
 - 1590s – Early stages of the Enlightenment (Philosophy)
- Catholic Loyalists: Spain, France, Italy
- Protestant/Lutheran: Holy Roman Empire (German states), Switzerland, Nordic kingdoms)
- Luther is famous for breaking things open. Calvin is famous for pulling things together.
- Calvin's Geneva (Switzerland) became a center of training for many theologians and pastors throughout Europe.

The Reformation in England

Henry VIII (1509-1547)

- Married to Catherine of Aragon (Spain) but not able to produce a male heir.
- The Act of Succession and the Act of Supremacy (1534) remove English church from papal jurisdiction.

Edward VI (1547-1553)

- King from ages 9-16. Lord protector, Edward Seymour guided Edward during his reign.
- Many leading Reformed theologians (Martin Bucer & Peter Martyr Vermigli) were given appointments in high church and academy positions during the reign of Edward VI.
- This is the foundation of the Church of England as Thomas Cranmer produces articles of religion which would serve as the foundation to the *39 Articles*.
- "Puritans" not satisfied with the continuing episcopal form or church government or the fact that the crown can compel certain religious rituals or vestments.

[Bloody] Mary (1553-1558)

- Mary was the daughter of Henry VIII by Catherine of Aragon and was staunchly Catholic.
- Mary persecuted protestants in England and tried to undo the work of the reformers in the Church of England.

Elizabeth I (1558-1603)

- Elizabeth was the daughter of Anne Boleyn (Henry's second wife).
- In the "Elizabethan Settlement" the Church of England returned to Protestantism.
- In agreement with its foundation, the Church of England was thoroughly Reformed while remaining episcopal in government.
- Elizabeth never married and died childless.

James I (James VI of Scotland) 1603-1625

- Because he was Scottish, the Puritans were hopeful that he would promote their cause and further "reform" the Church of England.
- James did not do so: "No bishops, no king."

Charles I (1625-1649)

- Things escalate when Charles becomes king.
- Charles marries Henrietta Maria of France (Catholic) and allows her to receive Mass.
- Moreover, Charles' appointees to various church positions move the church in a Catholic direction and cause much unrest in England.
- William Laud was appointed to be the Archbishop of Canterbury and his reforms move the Church of England away from its solidly Reformed foundation into an Arminian and Catholic direction.
- Things were greatly escalated by the fact that there was reason to believe that the children of Charles and Henrietta Maria would be raised as Catholics (and eventually rule over England).
- England descended into civil war with Scotland when Charles and Laud attempted to impose Anglican worship practices on the Scottish Presbyterians.
- Tension between the British Parliament and the British Crown had been present throughout Charles' reign and this tension came to a boiling point in the mid 17th c.
- Ultimately, Parliament and the Crown entered into war with one another and Parliament signed the Solemn League and Covenant with Scotland (1643).
- It was in the context of this league between the British Parliament and the Scottish people that the Parliament called the Westminster Assembly which was first tasked with revising the Thirty-Nine Articles.
- With a desire to unify the churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland, the Assembly was then tasked to put together a confession of faith and catechism by Parliament.

The Westminster Confession of Faith

Chapter 1 – Scripture

Chapter 2 – God

Chapter 3 – The Decrees

Chapter 4 – Creation

Chapter 5 – Providence

Chapter 6 – Humanity and Sin

Chapter 7 – Covenant Theology

Chapter 8 – Christ the Mediator

Chapters 9-15 – Soteriology (Salvation)

Chapters 16-18 – The Christian Life

Chapter 19 – God's Law

Chapters 20-24 – The Church and the World

Chapters 25-26 – The Church

Chapters 27-29 – The Sacraments

Chapter 30 - Church Discipline

Chapter 31 – Church Government

Chapters 32-33 – Eschatology

The Westminster Shorter & Larger Catechism

The Westminster Shorter Catechism

- 107 questions with answers for teaching.
- Covers similar overview of topics as the Confession.

The Westminster Larger Catechism

- 196 questions with answers for teaching.
- Covers similar overview of topics as the Confession.

Where Do We Go from Here?¹

- Week 1. Historical Overview and Introduction to the Westminster Standards
- Week 2. The Doctrine of Scripture
- Week 3. God the Trinity
- Week 4. God's Sovereign Freedom (the Decrees)
- Week 5. Humanity and Sin
- Week 6. Christ and Covenant
- Week 7. Justification
- Week 8. Sanctification
- Week 9. Law & Liberty
- Week 10. The Church
- Week 11. Sacraments
- Week 12. Worship
- Week 13. Eschatology

Bibliography

- *The Theology of the Westminster Standards* by: John Fesko
- *The Westminster Standards* lecture series by: Sinclair Ferguson
- *The Westminster Assembly* by: Robert Letham
- *Confessing the Faith* by: Chad Van Dixhoorn

¹ Subject to change