

Scottish Presbyterianism

Pop Quiz:

Thinking back to our discussion of the Protestant Reformation a few weeks back, who was referred to as the primary reformer of Scotland? _____ Which other major reformer was he influenced by? _____ What were some of the main issues that prompted these reformers to challenge the Roman Catholic Church?

The Scottish Reformation and the Origins of Presbyterianism

George Wishart: c. 1513-1546

Before John Knox had ever met John Calvin, and even before he had begun to preach against the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, there was a young preacher named George Wishart. Wishart was a Greek scholar and schoolmaster who fearlessly denounced the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. In defiance of the established church, Wishart translated the Swiss Helvetic confession into English, which pointed out many of the abuses of the Roman Church. For his “heresy”, Wishart was burned at the stake at the age of 33 at St. Andrews Church, but not before he left a significant impression on his fellow Scot, John Knox. *What about George Wishart’s training do you think enabled him to see issues in the church that needed reform?*

John Knox: 1513-1572

John Knox was born in 1513 in Haddington Scotland, and received education at the University of Glasgow and possibly also St. Andrews. Being an educated man, he worked as notary and as a private tutor. But Wishart’s calls for reform set Knox on a course to promote the Protestant reformation in Scotland. In the year following Wishart’s martyrdom, the tide seemed to be changing in favor of the Reformation. Knox began to preach in the pulpit of the same St. Andrews Church in 1547, where Wishart was murdered just one year prior. Knox’ ministry there was short-lived, however, due to the invasion of the French. Knox was captured and sent to France, but escaped to England, where he served as chaplain to king Edward VI, pushing the Church of England in a more Protestant direction. Once again, this ministry was short-lived since it was in 1553 that Mary Tudor (“Bloody Mary”; so called for her ruthless persecution of Protestants, political intrigue, and involvement in an assassination attempt on Elizabeth I) came to power in England, making Knox no longer welcome. It was at this point that John Knox came to Geneva, Switzerland; to the French reformer, John Calvin. Calvin was not only interested or appointed to reform the church alone, but also the state, which must have seemed like the next logical step in the Reformation movement. *Why do you think this might have been the case? Are there advantages to having the church influence the state? What are the dangers?*

Knox was finally able to return to Scotland for good in 1559, when he became the leader of the Reforming Party. At this time, Knox drafted three documents that brought definition and order to the Church of Scotland in the areas of doctrine, church organization, and public worship. The first was called *The Scots Confession*, which was a biblical-theological confession of faith. In it Knox promoted many of the theological teachings of Calvin, including teachings on original sin, predestination, regeneration,

effectual calling, the real, *spiritual* presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, etc... But while Calvin held that there were two marks of the true church (the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments), Knox added a third (the administration of church discipline). This document was adopted by the Scottish Parliament in 1560. *Has anyone ever read any of the Scots Confession? If so, what did you find in it that was either unique or helpful? Can anyone explain the difference between "biblical theology" and "systematic theology"? Knox's confession is considered by some to be biblical-theological. What about the Westminster Confession of Faith? Would you consider it to be biblical theology or systematic theology?*

The second was *The First Book of Discipline*, which established rules for the organization and administration of the church, such as the dispersal of tithes to support ministry, education, and the poor. Another important directive was the process by which ministers were called to a pastorate. They were to be *nominated* by the church and then *examined* by those who were theologically educated. *In what ways does this differ from the hierarchical system that was dominant in the Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches of the day? Why do you think it was important to Knox that ministers be examined by a theologically trained board? Where do you see these practices either present or not present among the various denominations today?*

The third document was *The Book of Common Order*, which gave direction to the churches regarding public worship. This was adopted by the General Assembly in 1564, and remained the standard until 1645. It was also in 1564 that the Scottish Parliament forbade the practice of the mass and rejected the Pope's authority over Scotland. Towards the end of his life, Knox inducted his own successor to the pulpit at St. Giles. His successors, John Craig, drafted a statement on Presbyterianism (as a form of church government) called *The King's Confession*, which was affirmed by king James Stuart in 1581. Clergy and graduates of Scottish universities were required to *subscribe* to the statement. *Why do you think it was important for the church to have its leaders subscribe to a statement on its form of government?*

Andrew Melville: 1545-1622

Andrew Melville was a highly educated Scot who is often referred to as the *Father of Presbyterianism*. He was the primary organizer of a more thorough Presbyterian form of church government, presented in *The Second Book of Discipline*. This document was adopted by the 1577 General Assembly in Scotland. One notable change from previous forms was that the terms "pastor", "bishop", and "minister" were treated as synonyms for the same office (which better reflects the meaning of the biblical terms from which they are derived). *Why is this a significant change in thought for the governing of the church?*

Excerpt from *A Commentary on the Confession of Faith*

With Questions for Theological Students and Bible Classes.

By Hodge, Archibald Alexander

Philadelphia, PA

Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1885. (Emphasis added)

It is asserted in the first chapter of this Confession, and vindicated in this exposition that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, having been given by inspiration of God, are for man in his present state the only and the all-sufficient rule of faith and practice. All that man is to believe concerning God, and the entire duty which God requires of man, are revealed therein, and are to be believed and obeyed because contained therein, because it is the word of God. This divine word, therefore, is the only standard of doctrine which has intrinsic authority binding the conscience of men. And all other standards are of value or authority only in proportion as they teach what the Scriptures teach.

While, however, the Scriptures are from God, the understanding of them belongs to the part of men. Men must interpret to the best of their ability each particular part of Scripture separately, and then combine all that the Scriptures teach upon every subject into a consistent whole, and then adjust their teachings upon different subjects in mutual consistency as parts of a harmonious system. Every student of the Bible must do this, and all make it obvious that they do it by the terms they use in their prayers and religious discourse, whether they admit or deny the propriety of human creeds and confessions. *If they refuse the assistance afforded by the statements of doctrine slowly elaborated and defined by the Church, they must make out their own creed by their own unaided wisdom. The real question is not, as often pretended, between the word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proven faith of the collective body of God's people, and the private judgment and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds.*

The Westminster Standards

The Historical Origins of Our Confession

Pop Quiz:

Which educated Scot is often considered to be the Father of Presbyterianism? _____

Why? In the *Second Book of Discipline*, he uses the terms “pastor”, “bishop”, and “minister” synonymously for the same office. Why is this a significant change in thought for the governing of the church?

What does the word “Episcopal” mean and how is it different from “Presbyterian”?

Who were the (English) Puritans? What was important to them?

The National Covenant:

We left off in the late 16th century where the Church of Scotland had been given some freedom to further develop their Reformed and Presbyterian ideas and bring those ideas into practice in the church. At the same time, the Church of England was still strongly Episcopal in nature, operating under the form of government laid out in a document called *The Book of Common Prayer*. During the mid-seventeenth century, after Charles I came to power over a unified England and Scotland, the Church of Scotland was forced to adhere to *The Book of Common Prayer*. This led to rebellion throughout the nation. The nature of the rebellion was articulated in the document known as *The National Covenant* (1638), which was signed by many Scots who were thus known as the *Covenanters*. What do you suppose were some of the issues these Reformed Presbyterians had with a monarchy that sought to impose *The Book of Common Prayer*?

Solemn League and Covenant:

Around this same time, the Parliament of England (in London) was strongly represented by Puritanism. Charles I disbanded the Parliament from 1629-1640, ruling without it. Why might Charles I and the Puritan-dominated Parliament not see eye-to-eye?

While Charles I was seeking to subjugate the Scots, civil war broke out in England in 1642. Parliamentarians joined up with the Scottish rebellion through an agreement known as the *Solemn League and Covenant* (1643). In it, these parties sought to preserve Reformed beliefs and practices in Scotland as well as secure reform for the Church of England and Ireland in matters of doctrine, practice, and church government. What do you suppose were some of the causes the English Puritans and the Reformed Presbyterians had in common?

One thing the Puritans and Reformed Presbyterians had in common was their desire to seek the Word of God as the ultimate authority in how they approached these matters. This concept flew in the face of Charles I, who believed that kings alone had that kind of authority by divine right. The SL&C had also stipulated that, should the Parliamentarians succeed in overthrowing Charles I, they were not to execute him. However, when the parties of the SL&C had succeeded in defeating Charles I, Parliament renounced the Covenant and had Charles I executed (1649).

The Westminster Assembly

Quiz: What is the proper pronunciation of "Westminster"?

Before it was renounced by the English, one of the important efforts of the Solemn League and Covenant was to bring the Church of England into uniformity with the Church of Scotland (and not the other way around). To bring about the necessary changes, the SL&C called an assembly of English Parliamentarians and Scottish commissioners to meet in the Westminster Abbey, near London. The Assembly's goals included drafting a directory for public worship (1644), organizing rules for a Presbyterian form of church government (1645), and bring together a standard teaching of doctrines to replace/revise the *39 Articles*, which still had elements of Roman Catholicism and Arminianism that clashed with Calvinistic theology. *Is it important for a large body of believers to have a standard for doctrine? Why/Why not?*

Disagreements over forms of worship led the Scots to refuse the *Directory for Public Worship*. Differences in views regarding how a church should be governed led the English to eventually reject the Presbyterian form of government. The Assembly's doctrinal efforts were far more fruitful. The Westminster Confession of Faith was completed in 1646, adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1647, and by the English Parliament in 1648. Sadly, however, when Charles I's son, Charles II reigned in England, royal rule was implemented once again, and the Church of England drifted theologically away from the Westminster Standards towards a more Unitarian view by the eighteenth century.

Though the assembly's purpose to unify the churches of England and Scotland did not succeed, the Standards remained standard for the Scottish Presbyterians and made their way into American Presbyterianism, and have also greatly influenced many other protestant groups, including congregational and Baptist denominations who have their own edited versions of the Confession. Pastor/historian/Presbyterian, Sean Lucas points out the irony in this way, "The assembly produced a confessional standard that exercised vast influence in every realm of the Presbyterian church save the one for which it was originally intended--the established church in England."¹ *How does knowing the history of the origin of the Confession help us to read it?*