

A Summary of the Westminster Confession of Faith

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1. Holy Scripture

The whole of Scripture composed of the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments had its beginning in God, was committed to writing by men under divine inspiration, and is without error in its original autographs. Scripture is the complete revelation of God, the only clear and sufficient guide to salvation and the infallible and authoritative standard in all matters of doctrine, faith, and practice.

2. God and the Trinity

There is only one true God, eternally existing in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each one possessing in common all the attributes of deity and personality. This trinity is one God, the same in substance and equal in power and glory, yet distinct from one another in title and function.

3. God's Eternal Decree

From all eternity, God has freely ordained all things that come to pass, by His good pleasure, and wise, holy intention. This decree is unchangeable and is not conditioned upon God's foreknowledge or human choices, but according to His own sovereign and glorious purpose. God has predestined some men to eternal life in Christ, extending His mercy and grace, and has passed over the rest of mankind, leaving them to His justice and wrath. God appoints not only these ends but also the means by which they are accomplished. This doctrine is to be embraced with great humility and is to produce proper diligence.

4. Creation

In the beginning, God created the world and all things in it out of nothing in six ordinary days to show the glory of His power, wisdom and goodness. Last in the order of creation, God made man, male and female, in His own image, with knowledge, righteousness, and His law in their hearts. God endowed this first couple with the ability to obey His command as well as the freedom of will to choose otherwise, making them capable of a fall.

5. Providence

God, the Almighty Creator, by His wise providence sustains, directs and governs all that comes to pass according to His sovereign will. Although God is the ultimate power and cause of everything, He ordinarily works out His providence by means of secondary causes, yet at times, is pleased to effect His purposes by supernatural means. God's providence extends to the fall and sinning, though sin does not proceed from God.

While God sometimes allows believers to be tempted and to sin for their own humbling and ultimate good, He blinds the ungodly and gives them over to their sinful choices for their own condemnation.

6. Fall of Mankind, Sin and Punishment

Man, the crown of creation, was made for communion with God, but rebelled against his creator by willful disobedience, thus incurring alienation from God, the loss of original righteousness and comprehensive moral corruption and rendering him powerless to please God. The guilt and corruption of Adam's sin, by covenantal representation, was imputed to all his descendants. In this corrupt condition men are completely hindered from good and inclined to evil, and are subjects of God's anger and punishment. This condition of original sin, while pardoned through Christ, remains even in the regenerate in this earthly life.

7. God's Covenant with Mankind

Separated by such a vast distance, God graciously condescended to relate to man by means of covenants. There are two primary covenants: the covenant of creation (works) which Adam broke and plunged his race into ruin; and the covenant of redemption (grace) in which God bound Himself to redeem a people from the curse of Adam by means of substitution. In this second covenant, Christ came to fulfill the original covenant by His perfect obedience and sacrificial death, thus offering life and salvation through faith in His finished work. This latter covenant was administered differently before Christ under the law and its promises and after Christ under the gospel with its fulfillment.

8. Christ the Mediator

God chose and ordained Jesus, His eternal Son, to be the head and Savior of His people. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, of one substance and equal to the Father, retained His deity while taking on the nature of a man, being born of the virgin Mary, and is therefore fully God, fully man and fully equipped as the only mediator between God and man. As such, Jesus: fulfilled the law; suffered in body and soul; was crucified, dead, buried, and resurrected; ascended to heaven, intercedes for believers and will return in judgement. The perfect obedience and sacrificial death of Jesus fully satisfied God's justice, securing redemption for all the elect. The benefits of which are applied by the Holy Spirit to all true believers, even those who lived before Christ's incarnation.

9. Free Will

Before the fall, man could naturally will and freely do what pleases God or choose otherwise. Given the fall, man is hopelessly dead in sin, opposed by nature and unable to choose any spiritual good. Fallen man can in no way affect his own conversion, but God graciously converts sinners, renewing their disposition so as to free the will to do what is spiritually good. Because this fallen nature remains, the believers choice of good is imperfect. Such perfection is reserved for the state of glory.

10. Effectual Calling

At His appointed time, God effectually calls the elect out of sin and death into life and salvation by His Word and Spirit. By this free and gracious call, God enables each person to come to Christ voluntarily and to receive what He offers and actually gives. Elect infants dying in infancy as well as other elect persons incapable of being called by the Word are saved by Christ through the Spirit. All others, not chosen, never truly come to Christ and cannot be saved.

11. Justification

Justification is that free act by which God pardons sinners and accepts them as if they were righteous for the sake of Christ alone. This declaration is grounded upon Christ's obedience and judicial satisfaction earned by Christ, which is imputed to believers by means of faith alone. Christ's finished work on the cross fully paid the debt of those justified, so that their status before God is not the result of anything in them but of Grace alone. This justification of believers, which is the same in the Old and New Testaments, is decreed from all eternity. Yet the elect are declared just only as the Holy Spirit actually applies Christ to them in time.

12. Adoption

Those effectually called and justified are adopted by God as sons and daughters to enjoy the privileges of their new creation and new relationship in God's family.

13. Sanctification

Sanctification is the continual work of the Word and Spirit destroying the power of sin, renewing the image of God, and enabling the practice of true holiness. This work is comprehensive, but not complete in this life as the sinful nature continues to war against the Spirit. While the old nature sometimes gains ground, the power of Christ's Spirit enables believers to overcome and continue to grow in grace.

14. Saving Faith

Saving faith is a gift from God worked by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the elect and aided by the Word, prayer, and the sacraments. By faith the elect believe and obey the Word of God, and rest upon Christ alone for salvation. Such faith differs in degree among believers and within individual believers, but always bears up.

15. Repentance Unto Life

Repentance is the fruit of the gospel at work in the lives of believers enabling them to see their sins as hateful and to forsake them turning to God. While repentance is not meritorious, it is the necessary means by which sins are forgiven. Repentance is to be made for individual sins in particular confessing them privately to God and publicly as appropriate to those wronged.

16. Good Works

God alone is good and the qualifying source of all good works. Such works are done in obedience to God as the fruit of true faith. Believers are enabled to do good works entirely by the Holy Spirit. These works never exceed what God requires or merit salvation, but are accepted and rewarded by God as He views them as in Christ. While the works of unbelievers do not please God, such persons are better off doing them than not.

17. Perseverance of the Saints

True believers can never fully or finally fall from grace, but will endure to the end and be saved. Such endurance rests on God's unchangeable election and love, Christ's merit and intercession, the Spirit's presence and power, and the nature and promise of God's grace. But by neglecting these means of preservation, true believers may for a time fall away from God.

18. Assurance of Grace and Salvation

While the unregenerate may deceive themselves with false hopes about salvation, true believers may in this life be fully assured that they are in a state of grace, because of the divine truth of the promises, the inward evidence of grace, and the witness and seal of the Spirit. This assurance does not always come without doubts, conflicts, and delays, but may be gained by the ordinary working of the Holy Spirit. Every believer should diligently seek this full certainty as a great advantage, knowing that while it may be shaken, it is never completely lost.

19. The Law of God

God gave Adam a law as a covenant of works, promising life upon obedience and threatening death upon disobedience. After the fall this law ceased to offer salvation, but continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness and was given as such in the Ten Commandments. In addition to this moral law, God gave to Israel as a pre-Christian assembly of believers, ceremonial laws prefiguring Christ and the benefits of faith in Him, but which are now nullified under the New Testament. God also gave national Israel judicial laws which expired with the Old Testament Church State and are no longer binding in the Christian era beyond principles of general equity. The moral law, however, does pertain to all men and its obligation is only strengthened in the gospel by Christ. True believers do not stand or fall by this law, but are helped by it as it reveals God's will, convicts human sin, drives men to Christ and motivates faithful obedience. None of these uses are contrary to the gospel of grace.

20. Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience

Christ has purchased for believers in all ages freedom from: sin's guilt and rule, God's wrath, the law's curse, the world's evil and affliction, Satan's slavery, death's sting, the grave's victory and everlasting damnation. In the New Testament, such liberty includes: freedom from the ceremonial law, greater access to God and a fuller gift of the Spirit. God alone is Lord of the conscience and He has left it free from the dictates of men. Practicing sin is not only contrary to Christian freedom, but actually destroys its purpose. Both Church and State authorities are established by God to uphold Christian freedom, therefore those who oppose such authorities under the guise of Christian freedom are actually resisting God and should be called to account by the Church.

21. Religious Worship and the Sabbath

That God exists and is to be worshipped is clearly revealed in the created order. In Scripture God reveals how He is to be worshipped. Worship is restricted to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and must be mediated by Christ alone. Worship through prayer must be made in Jesus name, by the Spirit's help, according to God's will and with human understanding. It is to be offered for the living and those yet to live, but not for the dead. Worship also includes: Bible reading, sound preaching, attentive hearing, spiritual singing and the sacraments, as well as occasions for special oaths, vows, fasts and thanks. Under the gospel, there is no holy ground, but God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth as individuals, families, and holy assemblies which are not to be neglected. One day in seven is to be set apart for worship.

22. Lawful Oaths and Vows

Lawful oaths are part of worship and are appropriate to take. An oath must be sworn only by God's name in the plain sense of the words used, and may not bend one to sin or be broken. Vows, like oaths, must be made to God alone promising only what can be performed and nothing contrary to God's word, such as monastic vows.

23. Civil Authorities

God has established civil authorities and given them power to promote right and punish wrong for His own glory. Christians may perform the duties of public office supporting truth and justice, and lawfully waging war on just causes. Civil authorities are not to interfere in matters of the Church and faith, but are obligated to protect any denomination of Christians and all individuals regardless of their faith. It is the people's duty to honor and respect civil authorities, praying for them and obeying their lawful commands.

24. Marriage and Divorce

Marriage is to be between one man and one woman at a time. It was ordained by God for the mutual help, legitimate propagation, and moral purity of the husband and wife. Everyone capable of giving their consent may lawfully marry, but Christians should only marry other Christians. Marriage between family members is forbidden as in the Bible. Fornication before and adultery after marriage is just cause to dissolve the relationship, freeing the innocent party to sue for divorce and afterward remarry as if the guilty party was dead.

25. The Church

The universal Church is invisible and consists of all the elect. The visible, Church consists of everyone in the world who professes Christian faith together with their children. Christ is the only head of the Church and has enabled the visible Church to function through the ministry, scriptures, and ordinances of God. The universal church has been more and less visible in history and this visible expression in particular churches is also more or less pure.

26. The Communion of the Saints

All believers are united to Christ, their head by His Spirit and by faith, and are bound to one another in Christ's fellowship to nurture their mutual good, both spiritual and physical, by their gifts and graces. This communion is to be offered as opportunity arises and does not restrict the right to personal property.

27. The Sacraments

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, which represent Christ and His benefits, distinguish the Church from the world and engage believers in faithful Christian living. There is a spiritual relationship between the sign and the thing signified. The grace revealed by the sacraments does not reside in them or depend on those who administer them, but the resulting power and effects of the sacraments are mediated by the Spirit resting on God's Word and received by faith. Only two sacraments were instituted by Christ—Baptism and the Lord's Supper, administration of which is limited to lawfully ordained ministers. The Old Testament sacraments signify and reveal the same things as those in the New Testament.

28. Baptism

Baptism was instituted by Christ as a perpetual ordinance until the end of the age. This sacrament signifies a person coming to faith and belonging to Christ and is to be administered only once. The sign used is water and is correctly administered by pouring or sprinkling. Salvation is not inseparably connected with baptism nor is the effectiveness of baptism tied to the time of its administration.

29. The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ before His crucifixion as a perpetual remembrance of His death; a seal of the benefits of His sacrifice; a sign of spiritual nourishment of believers; and a pledge of their communion with Christ and each other. This sacrament commemorates Christ's singular sacrifice, but does not repeat it. The Lord's Supper is to be administered to those present according to biblical instructions, and avoiding the abuses of private or restricted communions. The bread and wine signifying Christ's body and blood do not change substance. Worthy partakers spiritually receive and feed on Christ and His benefits by faith. Unbelievers are restricted from the Lord's Supper lest they bring damnation on themselves. From creation to Christ, the seventh day was observed as the Sabbath. After Christ's resurrection, the first day is celebrated as the Lord's Day. This day is to be spent resting from worldly affairs of work and duty and resting in sacred privileges of worship and mercy.

30. Church Censures

The government of the church is established by Christ separate from the state and to be administered by officers, to whom authority is given to close the kingdom to the unrepentant and open it to repentant sinners through the gospel. Church censures are necessary to: reclaim fallen believers; turn others from sinning; purify the church; vindicate Christ's honor; and avoid God's wrath. Church officers, to govern better, are to proceed by admonition, temporary exclusion from the Lord's Supper or excommunication according to the nature and severity of the case.

31. Synods and Councils

Synods and councils ought to be held to: settle controversies; establish rules for better government; and receive and address complaints. Decisions made by such bodies must conform to Scripture and be solemnly received. Because synods and councils are fallible, they are to be used only as aids to answering questions of faith and living. Synods and councils are to be occupied with Church concerns exclusively except in extraordinary cases when advice is requested by civil authorities.

32. The State of Mankind After Death and the Resurrection

After death, the bodies of men return to dust, but their souls live on forever. The souls of the righteous are received into heaven, and those of the wicked are cast into hell. At the last day, those living will be changed without seeing death and all the dead will be resurrected in their former bodies. Christ will raise the bodies of the unjust to dishonor, but by His Spirit, He will raise the bodies of the just to honor.

33. The Last Judgment

God has appointed a day when the apostate angels and all people who have ever lived will be called to account before the court of Christ and be judged by Him according to what they have done. God's glorious purpose will be revealed at this last judgment by the display of His mercy in the salvation of the elect and His justice in the damnation of the unsaved. The righteous will be ushered into everlasting life and joy in the fullness of God's presence, whereas the wicked will be consigned to eternal punishment and torment away from God's gracious presence. While Christ has made known the certainty of this judgment, the time of its execution has been left uncertain intentionally, so that we may never rest in worldly and false securities, but always be ready to face that great and coming day of the Lord.