

***The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, by Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield.** Volume 6 of *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1931; reprinted separately, Cherry Hill, N.J.: Mack Publishing Company, 1972. 400 pages.

—Reviewed by Tito S. Lyro.

The Westminster Confession of Faith is the crown jewel of all Reformed confessions. Since its formulation in the 1640's, English-speaking Presbyterians (and many non-English speaking Presbyterians as well) have embraced this magnificent document as an accurate expression of the system of doctrines that they hold dear. Because of such historic subscription, Presbyterians who have abandon confessional orthodoxy have felt the need to link their unorthodox positions to the Westminster Confession of Faith. One of the ways that unorthodox Presbyterians twist the Confession is by saying that it should be interpreted independently from the historical context in which it was written. In other words, they make the Confession a living document devoid of any historical background. By doing that they make the Confession say almost anything they want. This method of interpretation, however, is somewhat new. A more traditional approach to linking unorthodox beliefs to the Confession was first used by Charles Briggs at the end of the 1800s.

Mr. Briggs thought that if he could show that the Westminster divines did not personally believe in the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture and its inerrancy, he would be able to show that, by logical deduction, the Confession itself would not teach such a view, thus proving that his unorthodox position was a confessional one. In order to show that the type of doctrine Mr. Briggs was proposing was neither scriptural nor confessional, Dr. B. B. Warfield wrote a series of articles originally published in *The Princeton Review* and *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* and later (posthumously) collected and published as *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*<sup>1</sup> by a committee appointed by Dr. Warfield himself in his will.

The book is organized around six chapters. The first chapter provides a bird's eye view of the history behind the Westminster Assembly and its works. Chapter two, on the other hand, zooms in to the day-to-day operation of the Assembly emphasizing specially the part the Scottish commissioners played in the discussions on the floor. Dr. Warfield did a superb job in describing the events and processes through which the Confession came into existence. As far as the history of the Assembly, chapters one and two are second only to Hetherington's *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat of a bonus feature in chapter two is Dr. Warfield's discussion of the making of the chapter on the decrees of God. Although he used chapter three of the Confession as a means to explain the process through which every chapter of the Confession went, Dr. Warfield provided one the most learned discussions on the formulation of the "horrible decree,"<sup>3</sup> as it has been called, found in that particular chapter of the Confession.

---

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (Alberta: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), iii. My research has shown that this book is currently out of print, but it can still be obtained as part of *The Complete works of Benjamin Warfield* (Baker, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> William M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Reprinted. Alberta: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> J. Ligon Ducan, III & David W. Hall, "1993 Westminster Assembly Commemoration: A Bibliography," n.p. Online: <http://capo.org/calvin/wesassem.html>.

Chapters 3 and 4 are the heart of the book. Although all the other chapters are of great value, these two chapters are worth every penny you might spend in purchasing the book. The main reason why these two chapters are so important is that in them Dr. Warfield proves that Mr. Briggs' charge that the divines did not believe in the plenary and verbal inspiration of the Scriptures is completely false. Chapter 3 offers an excellent commentary on the first chapter of the Westminster Confession. Dr. Warfield discusses section by section of that Confession chapter providing background information, tracing original sources, and showing the foundational work done by the Assembly. Besides this magnificent commentary, Dr. Warfield also compares the chapter on the Holy Scripture to earlier confessions and to the Irish Articles of 1615.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 4 is arguably the most important chapter in the entire book. It is in this chapter that Dr. Warfield takes Mr. Briggs on. As described above, Mr. Briggs thought that if he could show that Puritans contemporary with the Assembly did not believe in the plenary and verbal inspiration, he then would have proved that the divines held the same belief. The five Puritans that Mr. Briggs decided to use as ultimate proof of his hypothesis were John Ball, William Lyford, Richard Capel, Richard Baxter, and Samuel Rutherford.<sup>5</sup> So, Dr. Warfield masterfully demonstrates that Mr. Briggs completely misquoted these Puritans. The chapter closes with what Dr. Warfield calls "The Real Westminster Doctrine,"<sup>6</sup> where he quotes Dr. Lightfoot extensively in order to show what the divines meant by inspiration.

Chapter 5 consists of an extensive discussion of the actual printing of the Westminster Standards up to the time of Dr. Warfield. In it you will find very interesting information such as the fact that the Confession was first published in Scotland, not in England, as one would expect.<sup>7</sup> Also, you will discover that "the Westminster Confession was slow in finding its way into print in America. This was not because it was distasteful to the American Churches: the Puritanism of the Colonists was doctrinally the same as that of England, and they gave a hearty welcome to this Puritan formulary."<sup>8</sup> The problem was that the colonists, at first, did not have the capability to print and later on they preferred the Savoy Declaration due to their Congregational beliefs.<sup>9</sup> The first commercial printing of the Confession in America did not take place till 1710 in New London.<sup>10</sup> This is indeed a fascinating chapter because, in discussing the printing of the Confession, Dr. Warfield does a great job of describing the churches' attitude toward, and opinion of, the Confession.

In chapter 6, Dr. Warfield traces the origin of the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism to Calvin's catechism.<sup>11</sup> It is his contention that the divines relied heavily on Calvin's work while also taking into consideration some of the *lesser* catechisms along the way. The information in this chapter is of great use for anyone who is starting a serious study of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, 170-189.

<sup>5</sup> There are three others (Vines, Poole, and Wallis), but they are only mentioned as secondary evidence.

<sup>6</sup> Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, 273.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 347-348.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

Shorter Catechism. The entire book is a “must read” for any one who wants to understand the background behind the writing of the Westminster Confession of Faith and what the Westminster Assembly believed concerning the inspiration of the Scriptures.