



## Introduction

LIGON DUNCAN

This volume is the third in a series of what has become four volumes, all part of a larger scholarly initiative known as Reformed Theological Seminary's "Westminster Assembly Project," begun in the early 1990s, with the encouragement of the administration of Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, Mississippi; Orlando, Florida; Charlotte, North Carolina; Washington, DC; Atlanta, Georgia). As a part of this project, a group of eminent scholars from around the world was approached to participate in the production of literature (both popular and academic) designed to discuss and debate the most important issues in current post-Reformation studies, as well as promote interest in the Westminster Assembly and its work. For more information about the literary products of this project, the reader is referred to the introduction of the first volume.

For more than a decade and a half, we have been researching, producing literature, and preparing this multi-volume set of scholarly essays on various subjects related to the work of the Westminster Assembly. Our aim has been to produce something of a symposium on the theology of the Assembly. Indeed, prior to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America each summer, over the past decade, RTS has sponsored a conference on the Westminster Assembly, during which some of the contents





### *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*

of these volumes were first presented. Because this endeavor was a public discussion and debate on the theology and work of the Assembly, not all the contributors are in agreement, though all of us have a high regard for the product and importance of the Assembly.

As an example of the kind of differences and debate we have been willing to allow, I could mention what is, perhaps, the most widely reported and discussed historical claim in these volumes is David Wright's assertion in volume two, that the Westminster Confession teaches a doctrine of "baptismal regeneration." I never thought this claim held water (if I can put it that way!), and Chad Van Dixhoorn's research has now shown, authoritatively, that that assertion is unfounded and incorrect. Nevertheless, out of deference to Dr. Wright (who was, before his recent death, a widely respected patristic and reformation scholar, and who had partnered with Dr. Van Dixhoorn in the important work of producing a new definitive edition of the Minutes of the Assembly, and who was also my own, beloved, PhD supervisor at New College, Edinburgh), we allowed his article and his assertion to stand as submitted as both a professional courtesy and as a normal part of scholarly debate.

Another example of differences represented in this symposium is on the subject of Westminster, Calvin and the Lord's Supper. Dr. Wayne Spear's chapters in this volume take a different approach than my own in volume two. This kind of debate is enriching though for the scholar and student of the Assembly, and so we commend all our contributions to you for your critical assessment and reflection. If we have started and can start healthy discussions in disputed or neglected areas of the Assembly's theology, then we may help clarify these theological and historical issues for generations to come.

That being said, most of the contributors to these volumes both have a positive appreciation of and are in general agreement about the Assembly's theology. For example, all of us would embrace





## *Introduction*

some form of a “continuity view” of how the Westminster theology (and the larger Puritan/Protestant Scholastic stream) relates to the earlier Reformed tradition. Consequently, we argue for the basic continuity between Calvin and Calvinism, without ignoring developments and discontinuities.

As I have said in the introductions to the two previous volumes, our purpose is to **inform, challenge, evaluate, and commend**. We aim (1) to inform the reader about the Assembly in its historical, theological, political, and social setting, (2) to challenge inaccurate assertions commonly made about Westminster in its relation to both earlier and later Reformed theology, (3) to provide fresh evaluation of its place in and contribution to the Calvinian tradition, and (4) to commend the Westminster theology as a faithful expression of clear-headed Christian thinking for our own generation.

There are many reasons why it is beneficial for us to study the Westminster Assembly. I have already articulated some of those reasons in the introduction to the first volume. And precisely because such a study is worthwhile, my colleagues and I have assembled contributions from an impressive list of students of Westminster and its context, to provide a window into its work and world.

This volume begins with an essay from Chad Van Dixhoorn on “The Westminster Assembly at Work.” Dr. Van Dixhoorn is general editor of the Westminster Assembly Project (a project distinct and different from the RTS Westminster Assembly Project)—an endeavor that focuses on editing and publishing documents from the Westminster Assembly in an effort to greatly expand our knowledge on the work of the Assembly (the appendix to this volume being a case in point). In his chapter, Van Dixhoorn masterfully updates the work of B.B. Warfield and Samuel Carruthers on the everyday work of the Assembly. He also gives a totally new and comprehensive view of the Assembly, in contrast to that of (for instance) Robert Paul, and consequently challenges a reductionistic account of the Assembly.





### *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*

Professor Robert Cara's essay, "Redemptive-Historical Themes in the Westminster Larger Catechism," sounds a clear note that needs to be heard and appreciated by many in our own time. Whereas some pit union with Christ over and against the *ordo salutis*, redemptive history (or biblical theology) over against systematic theology, Cara refutes these false juxtapositions and shows how the Larger Catechism, in a systematic framework, helpfully depicts redemptive historical/biblical theological themes in its treatment of union with Christ. Bob is a good friend, and the Chief Academic Officer of Reformed Theological Seminary.

Dr. Rowland S. Ward (faithful minister in the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, prolific author and admired colleague) contributes an outstanding overview of the history of confessional subscription in chapter three of this volume. Rowland's essay is called "Subscription to the Confession." Few people know the subjects of the history of subscription, and the doctrine, logic and justification of subscription, as well as Rowland. Hence, we are well-rewarded in reading his superb summarization and long-considered reflections on this hotly debated subject.

Dr. Robert Norris' contribution, "The Thirty-Nine Articles at the Westminster Assembly," discusses the early history of the Assembly, presenting his mature reflections on the Assembly's often overlooked debates over the Thirty-Nine Articles. Norris gives a clear argument about the importance of these early discussions for the subsequent work of the Assembly, drawing particular attention to the gathering's debates over the doctrine of justification. Dr. Norris' work was written before Van Dixhoorn's research and so one will want to read him in dialogue with Van Dixhoorn's findings.

"Karl Barth and the Westminster Confession of Faith," Will Traub's chapter, shows Barth's surprisingly high esteem of the Assembly, despite his vigorous disagreements with its theology. Will, a long-time missionary in Germany, and very able scholar walks us through this material critically, but respectfully.





## *Introduction*

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it has been common to argue that Reformed theology does not embrace natural theology. J. V. Fesko and Guy Richard demonstrate otherwise in their essay, “Natural Theology and the Westminster Confession of Faith.” Any assessment of how the epistemology of the Confession relates to post-Kantian reformed epistemology must reckon with the kind of material Fesko and Richard unearth.

Derek Thomas gives us the best concise treatment of the lap-sarian issue at the Assembly that I have ever read in his chapter, “The Westminster Consensus on the Decree.” This essay, in fact, changed my mind about the issue. I won’t say more. That’s endorsement enough, except to say that Derek has been my colleague in church and academy for a joyous decade and a half now, and I thank God for him.

In his essay, “The New Perspective: Paul, Luther, and Judaism,” Donald Macleod (Principal and Professor of Theology at the Free Church of Scotland College, Edinburgh) assesses the New Perspective from a Westminsterian perspective, especially focusing on N.T. Wright’s understanding of justification. Macleod has a way of getting to the heart of things, and he is characteristically insightful and provocative here.

For those who think that Westminster theology does not promote missions or that missions is absent from the Confession because it does not contain a specific chapter on the subject, they may want to think again after considering Valdeci Santos’ essay, “A Missiological Analysis of the Westminster Confession of Faith.” Valdeci is a former student, now professor and leader in the Brazilian Presbyterian Church.

In the debates on Calvin, the Lord’s Supper, and the Reformed tradition, three schools of thought (or at least tendencies) can be detected. One reads into Calvin’s views of the presence of Christ and sacramental efficacy positions that he himself did not hold. A second suggests that the Westminster standards and later Reformed orthodoxy had a slightly different view than Calvin, but





### *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*

prefers Calvin's views to those of the later Reformed tradition. A third likewise posits that the Westminster standards and later Reformed orthodoxy had a different view than Calvin, but sides with the later Reformed tradition over against Calvin (William Cunningham, Robert Lewis Dabney and Donald Macleod all fall into this camp). Both of Spears' essays in this volume stand squarely in this third school of thought. His essays are literally stimulating.

Mark Ross' "Improving the Means of Grace: The Larger Catechism on Spiritual Growth" practically and helpfully unfolds the instruction of the Westminster Larger Catechism to improve one's baptism. This is a notion that sounds strange to us in our day, but was once part of normal Christian instruction in the church at an older, wiser, and healthier time. Mark is a cherished friend and Professor of Theology at Erskine Seminary on Columbia, SC.

In his essay, "The Westminster Standards and the Structure of Christian Ethics," now-retired Covenant Seminary professor David C. Jones elaborates on the Westminster Standards' contribution to Christian ethics—a "study of the way of life that conforms to the will of God as revealed in Christ and the Holy Scriptures." He argues that the Standards can be more fully appreciated by relating the threefold fundamentals of ethics—goal, disposition, and norms—to "the thematic unity of covenant theology" and proposes looking at these respectively as covenant purpose, covenant virtue, and covenant practice.

And finally in my essay, "Objections to the Covenant Theology of the Confession," I offer an introductory examination of the objections and responses to classic covenant theology. In general, I am responding to Barthian criticisms of Westminster's covenant theology, but I also rejoin the venerated John Murray (to whom I owe so much, but who, in this area, got some things wrong, I think), and also engage a little bit with the so-called "federal vision."

The magnitude of the Assembly and its work, the quality of its product, and its significance for the English-speaking world and





### *Introduction*

beyond in successive generations should not be underestimated, but often is today. The Assembly's theological formulations are a landmark of pastoral theology, and the work of the Assembly marks the highpoint of Reformed confessionalism, and thus warrants the further study, consideration, discussion and debate that these essays intend to promote.

J. Ligon Duncan, III, BA, MDiv, MA, PhD  
General Editor, The Westminster Assembly Project  
Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church (PCA), Jackson, Mississippi, USA  
President, Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals  
Adjunct Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary  
Past Moderator, General Assembly, Presbyterian Church in America

