

An Introduction to the Reformed Faith

Nov. 5. Introduction
Nov. 12. History and variations
Nov. 19. Heidelberg Catechism
Nov. 26. Westminster Standards

Dec. 3. Salvation, Election, Predestination, Providence
Dec. 10. Covenant; Christ as Prophet, Priest, & King
Dec. 17. Culture and Society

Orientation

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms are the culmination of more than a century of close biblical study and dangerous intra-Protestant conflict.

The main point in all Reformed statements from the 1520s is the same: God initiates the salvation that is freely given in Christ.

In the Reformed view, humans are active in receiving the gift of salvation, but do not create the gift themselves.

Compared to Lutheran, Anglican, and Orthodox views of salvation, the Reformed find less mystery in the process. Compared to the Anabaptists and modern evangelicals, the Reformed found less for humans to do in initiating salvation.

The special difficulty for Reformed understandings of salvation, especially now, is that they work against the deeply ingrained assumptions about self-direction and self-sufficiency that have prevailed in the Western world since the Enlightenment.

A modern Christian question about the use of Scripture in the Westminster standards is whether enough attention was paid to the broad sweep of biblical narratives as opposed to information gathered together from individual biblical passages.

Some of the biblical foundations for the Westminster statements

Matthew 11:25-30 (esp. v. 27: "those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him")

John 6:37-40 (esp. vv. 37, 39: "all that the Father gives me")

John 10:27-30 (esp. "my father . . . has given them to me")

John 17:106 (esp. v. 6: "those whom you gave me")

Ephesians 1:3-12 (esp. v. 4: "chose us in him before the creation of the world")

Romans 3:21-4:8 (the positive statement of justification by faith through grace)

Romans 8:28-30 ("foreknew ... predestined ... called ... justified ... glorified")

Romans 9:30-32 (v. 14, "Is God unjust?" v. 16, "It does not . . . depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." v. 20, "Who are you . . . to talk back to God.")

Romans 11:33-36 (v. 33, "How unsearchable are his judgments")

2 Timothy 1:8-10 (esp. the bestowal of grace before the worlds began)

Westminster Confession

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| 3. God's eternal decree | 10. Effectual Calling | 16. Good works |
| 5. Providence | 11. Justification | 17. Perseverance |
| 6. Fall-consequences | 12. Adoption | 18. Assurance |
| 7. Covenant | 13. Sanctification | |
| 8. Christ the Mediator | 14. Saving Faith | (1903) Holy Spirit |
| 9. Free will | 15. Regeneration | (1903) The Gospel |

Augsburg Confession (1530): 4. **Justification.** It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:2-26 and 4:5.

The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1571): 17. **Of predestination and election.** Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he has constantly decreed by his council secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he has chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honor. Wherefore they which are indued with so excellent a benefit of God are called according to God's purpose by his Spirit working in due season; they through grace obey the calling; they are justified freely; they are made sons of God by adoption; they are made like the image of his only begotten Son Jesus Christ; they walk religiously in good works; and at length by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity.

As the godly consideration of predestination and our election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it does greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it does fervently kindle their love to God. So, for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's predestination is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the devil does thrust them either into desperation or into recklessness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation.

Furthermore, we must receive God's promise in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in holy Scripture; and in our doings, that will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God.

Heidelberg Catechism (1562)

Q. 21. *What is true faith?*

A. It is not only a certain knowledge by which I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word, but also a wholehearted trust which the Holy Spirit creates in me through the gospel, that, not only to others, but to me also God has given the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, out of sheer grace solely for the sake of Christ's saving work.

Q. 60. *How are you righteous before God?*

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have not kept any one of them, and that I am still ever prone to all that is evil, nevertheless, God, without any merit of my own, out of pure grace, grants me the benefits of the perfect expiation of Christ, imputing to me his righteousness and holiness as if I had never committed a single sin or had ever been sinful, having fulfilled myself all the obedience which Christ has carried out for me, if only I accept such favor with a trusting heart.

Q. 61. *Why do you say that you are righteous by faith alone?*

A. Not because I please God by virtue of the worthiness of my faith, but because the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ alone are my righteousness before God, and because I can accept it and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone.

Q. 62. *But why cannot our good works be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it?*

A. Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment of God must be absolutely perfect and wholly in conformity with the divine Law. But even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.

Q. 63. *Will our good works merit nothing, even when it is God's purpose to reward them in this life, and in the future life as well?*

A. This reward is not given because of merit, but out of grace.

Q. 64. *But does not this teaching make people careless and sinful?*

A. No, for it is impossible for those who are ingrafted into Christ by true faith not to bring forth the fruit of gratitude.