

**Independent Minded:
Why the Westminster Standards are Different in America**

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CH 321 Modern Age
12/17/2015

Introduction

In 1788 the Synod of New York and Philadelphia formally revised the Westminster Standards. These revisions mark a distinct shift in the history of the Westminster Tradition and remains a point of division between the American Presbyterian church and our British forebears. This paper will examine the causes for that change and ultimately argue that the WCF was modified because a new philosophical worldview and drastically altered political realities had led to a shift in the practice and belief of American Presbyterians.

Nature of the Changes

The American revisions to the WCF have to do primarily with the duties of the civil magistrate towards religion. Under the original version of the WCF the civil magistrate was called “to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed.”¹ While under the American Revisions the duty of the civil magistrate is “to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger.”² Thus the duty of the civil magistrate goes from protector of the true Christian faith to protector of all Christian sects. As a result of this shift in duties the right of the magistrate to call synods and church councils and be present at them is

¹ WCF (1647 Only) Chapter XXIII.3

² WCF (American Only) Chapter 23.3

abrogated as is his duty to take up the punishment of the heretic after the censures of the church have been exhausted.

It must be noted that referring to the American Revisions is slightly anachronistic as they were done in several stages, as early as the Adopting Act of 1729 the Synods of Philadelphia and New York declared that they had already agreed to take exception to parts of the standards saying that they,

“have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and in declaring that the said Confession and Catechisms to be the confession of their faith, excepting only some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, concerning which clauses the Synod do unanimously declare, that they do not receive those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority; or power to persecute any for their religion, or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain.”³

While not yet changing the standards, the American church had agreed to collectively scruple on this issue. Then in 1788 the Synod of New York and Philadelphia formally revised the Westminster Confession for the use of the new denomination, whose first General Assembly would meet the following year. But it was revised again by the northern branch of the American presbyterian church in 1903.⁴ The topic of this paper is reserved to the pre-1903 revisions, which deal with the nature of the duty of the civil magistrate to the church.

³ Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1904), 94-95.

⁴ The history of conservative revisions to the WCF stops in 1903, but the mainstream church continues to modify the WCF freely. (See PCUSA Book of Confessions)

Political Realities

The political situation in Great Britain⁵ in 1647 was tenuous. The king, Charles I, had engaged in years of struggle with his subjects including more than a decade of ruling without recourse to parliament and then recalled them only in order to raise funds to deal with a war in Scotland. The first phase of the English Civil War had only recently concluded with the imprisonment of Charles I by the forces of parliament. Yet, despite the shifting political landscape the faithful had reason to be hopeful. Though imperfectly and inconsistently implemented the state Church of Scotland was presbyterian and reformed by the historical consent and support of the crown. From the days of John Knox the reformed faith had been gaining ground in fits and starts. As early as 1590 James VI of Scotland (James I of England) had first signed his agreement to the, thoroughly reformed, Scots Confession (1560), the church had reason to expect the reform of the church and the protection of the king. These hopes had recently been tempered by James VI's later attempt to reimpose episcopacy on the Church of Scotland, but the pattern of state protection of the church was firmly established as a political possibility. This hope had been only recently reaffirmed in the form of the Solemn League and Covenant, an agreement by oath between Scots Presbyterians and the English Parliament which sought first of all "the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline and government, according to the Word of God, and the example of the best reformed Churches."⁶ There was no illusions that the civil magistrate would always perfectly fulfill his duty, but the claim "he hath authority, and it is his duty...[that] all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed," rings true when kings

⁵ The phrase is an historical anachronism as Great Britain was not formed until the Acts of Union of 1707, but it is adopted here for convenience to describe the political conglomeration of England, Scotland, Wales and her colonies in America which lasted roughly from 1603-1784.

⁶ "Solemn League and Covenant."

and parliaments were consistently affirming the same right and duty. Even more so when they occasionally performed this duty rightly for the true reform of the church and the suppression of prelacy and papacy.

In America, even as early as 1729, this claim would be far harder to believe, not because the magistrate had ceased to claim it for himself, but rather because he had consistently wielded it to the detriment of the church. The ultimate outcome of the Solemn League and Covenant was the failure of the reform of the church of England and even worse in Scotland. Charles II, son and eventual heir to Charles I, rescinded the oath he had made affirming the Solemn League and reintroduced episcopacy to the Church of Scotland, executing those ministers who resisted. His son James II and VII was even worse, wielding his authority over the church to attempt to reimpose popery onto his realms. Though he ultimately failed, the attempt alone was enough to cause his overthrow and replacement with his protestant daughter and son-in-law William and Mary and the making of laws to ensure protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain. More than that, the demographics of the colonies in America made it practically impossible to envision a church protected and regulated by the civil authorities. Large swaths of the population was made of up groups of dissenters who would not be accepted by presbyterians, Anglicans or papists. As a result it seemed to be more practical to defend the church by asserting the full independence of the church from the state. For the diversity meant that even if the traditional position was maintained by presbyterians the support of the populace for the imposition of religious unity was not there. While even the revised version of the WCF continued to affirm that the authority of the civil magistrate comes from God,⁷ this was a theological statement on the source of his power not a practical statement on his ability to wield it without the consent of the people. If the king, parliament or governors had attempted to impose a presbyterian and reformed

⁷ WCF (1647) Chapter 23.1

church on the colonies in 1729 the consequences would have been anything from simple failure to an outright rebellion. In a society as religiously diverse as the colonies it was a practical impossibility to affirm that the magistrate could regulate and reform the church. By 1788 this claim would be downright laughable. From 1760 onwards George III was viewed as being guilty of “a long train of abuses and usurpations” in the pursuit of “absolute Despotism.”⁸ His successor in governing the colonies, the government of the newly created United States, fully affirmed religious liberty as early as 1777, but finding clearest and fullest expression in the Bill of Rights, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”⁹ By 1788 the political situation had shifted so drastically that the doctrine of the WCF on the civil magistrate was not only seen as impractical, but un-American.

Philosophical World View

As is often the case a new shape to the political world is often followed or preceded by a new philosophical world view to match it. The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was exactly that and as such they adopted the philosophy that most popular and influential in America at the time. Thus the American Revisions reflect not just a changed political reality but a change in the underlying philosophy. Though the revisions express only minor differences in the relation of the magistrate to the church, they show a more fundamental shift in the practical understanding of the nature of man.

The traditional view of man in reformed theology, still maintained explicitly by the WCF, is that man is fundamentally compromised in all parts because he is fallen in Adam, saying that he is “wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body.”¹⁰ Men are therefore prone to

⁸ “United States Declaration of Independence.”

⁹ “United States Bill of Rights.”

¹⁰ WCF Chapter 6.2

evil and not good. The WCF says that even regenerate men are not fully sanctified in this life, “this corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified.”¹¹ The practical application of this to political philosophy was, for centuries, that we did not expect men to govern themselves well. What men needed was governance from above to correct and guide them to good living. Indeed we see the roots of this in the book of Judges where it is lamented that “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”¹² It is particularly to address this problem of lawlessness that God has given authority to civil magistrates to encourage the good and punish the wicked. This principle is logically and naturally applied to religious faithfulness as well as civic matters on the basis of the source of the authority. Indeed, it is put most strongly in the margin notes of the Geneva Bible for the above passage from Judges, “For where there is no Magistrate fearing God, there can be no true religion or order.”¹³ That is to say, the king does not rule by an authority inherent in himself, but rather with authority given by God, since this authority comes from God he has the duty to rule according to the Word of God. A magistrate who rules his people according to the Word of God has the duty and responsibility to concern himself with their worship, as the scriptures are by no means neutral about what proper worship is.

In the American Revisions the logic is far different and springs forth from a different philosophical world view. The change is simple, the traditional duty of the magistrate to regulate and reform the church from within is replaced by the duty to protect by ensuring the freedom of the church to operate without interference. The roots of this change are the, albeit inconsistent,

¹¹ WCF Chapter 6.5

¹² Judges 17:6 (ESV)

¹³ “Geneva Bible Notes - Judges,” accessed December 17, 2015, <http://www.reformedreader.org/gbn/gbnjudges.htm>.

adoption by American presbyterians of Scottish Common Sense Realism and the political philosophy of republicanism which flows out of it. The central thesis of SCSR is that all men possess a rational faculty which enables them to see certain basic truths about the world, namely, common sense. This necessitates that the base faculties of a non-Christian and those of a Christian are the same, they must all share the same common sense. It is on the basis of this shared understanding of the world that the political philosophy of republicanism is built. Since we can all agree on certain baseline truths about the world through the use of our rational faculties, it follows that we are capable of governing ourselves by mutual consent. Moreover, since we are capable of rational self-government it stands to reason that those things which we disagree about, specifically points of doctrine in the Christian faith, ought to be settled through free discourse and dialogue rather than outside imposition of views.

In this the American presbyterians had progressed in a very different direction from others in the Westminster tradition. The source of the adoption of SCSR by American presbyterians can be traced in large part to the teaching of the widely influential presbyterian minister and professor John Witherspoon. Witherspoon, who taught at Princeton University, before Princeton Seminary was founded, and served as the Convening Moderator of the first General Assembly, was intimately involved in both the spreading of SCSR¹⁴ and in the republican politics of the day, even signing the Declaration of Independence. By contrast, in Scotland SCSR in the church was ultimately defeated and the confession was never modified. Which explains how a Scottish contemporary of Witherspoon, the minister John Brown, was able to write against the absurdity of religious tolerance saying with some disdain that “positive or authoritative toleration proclaims to men a liberty to sin and promiseth them protection in so

¹⁴ Mark A Noll, *America's God* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2002), 105.

doing.”¹⁵ American presbyterians were so enthusiastic about the creation of a new secular state to embody the principles of republicanism founded on the assumptions of SCSR that King George III called it “a Presbyterian war.”¹⁶ George was not wrong about their support as we can see this clearly in the Letter to General Washington, which was one of the first acts of the new denomination, saying, “The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in States of America embrace the earliest opportunity in their power to testify the lively and unfeigned pleasure which they with the rest of their fellow citizens feel on your appointment to the first office in the nation.”¹⁷

Unique Historical Circumstances

We have examined the political realities and the philosophical worldview of American presbyterians, but these two factors by themselves do not explain why the WCF was revised. It is clear that the belief and practice of the ministers had changed from what was written in the original edition of the WCF but this change does not necessarily mean that a change to the confession was unavoidable. Conservative reformed churches are historically very wary about modifying their confessional documents. We can see this in the present day, with most OPC and PCA ministers objecting in practice to the teachings of the Westminster Standards on the Sabbath and yet the standards have not been modified. This is not mere conservatism, but inherent to the presbyterian form of church government which requires the assent of at least a majority of presbyters and presbyteries in order to make a change. Indeed, they must agree not

¹⁵ John Brown, *The Absurdity and Perfidy of All Authoritative Toleration of Gross Heresy, Blasphemy, Idolatry, Popery in Britain* (Glasgow: John Bryce, 1780), 14.

¹⁶ Merrill D. Smith, *The World of the American Revolution: A Daily Life Encyclopedia* (ABC-CLIO, 2015), 694.

¹⁷ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America From Its Organization A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841), 11-12.

only that a change needs to be made in the abstract, but on the wording of the specific alternative. Institutional inertia militates against changing confessional standards. The time when it is most easy to change the standards are at the birth of a new denomination, particularly a small one. We see this in the example of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church who at their founding decided to accept the 1788 revisions and cherry-pick from the 1903 revisions in order to assemble what we think of today as the American Revisions.¹⁸

Moreover the Synod of New York and Philadelphia had several other factors which worked towards enabling them to modify the confession. The synod was relatively small and of those men who attended many were educated under John Witherspoon at Princeton who had been bound together by a common war. Being a small and relatively homogenous group would make it easier to reach a consensus on modifications. Indeed, it is significant that this work was done at only one of the four synods which would make up the General Assembly of the new denomination and yet done on behalf of the denomination.¹⁹ For if any dissent existed in the other synods, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia was of one mind on the issue, declaring plainly in 1783,

“It having been represented to Synod that the Presbyterian church suffers greatly in the opinion of other denominations from an apprehension that they hold intolerant principles the Synod do solemnly and publicly declare that they ever have and still do renounce and abhor the principles of intolerance and we do believe that every peaceable member of civil society ought to be protected in the full and free exercise of their religion.”²⁰

¹⁸ “Report of the Committee on the Constitution,” accessed November 4, 2015, <http://www.opc.org/GA/constitution.html>.

¹⁹ *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, 539-540.

²⁰ *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, 499.

By the time of the first General Assembly in 1789 the revisions were a fiat accompli and thus were not even an issue of debate.

Conclusion

The 1788 revisions to the Westminster Confession of Faith are a uniquely American enterprise. They represent a major modification of the thought of the Westminster tradition on the duties and role of the civil magistrate. This was the result of an increasing distrust of the authority of civil magistrates and a pragmatic concern for the protection of the church combined with a partial adoption of the philosophical and political world view of their new country. The change in the belief and practice of the ministers combined with the opportunities presented by the founding of a new nation and a new denomination account for the modifications to the WCF.

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