

The Experimental Religion of the Westminster Standards

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For those who sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*, these documents fix the bounds not only of theology and ethics, but also of the practical aspects of religion. The Westminster Standards, setting forth the system of truth found in Scripture, impact the preaching from the pulpit. That preaching, in turn, impacts the Christian lives of the hearers by describing the work of the Spirit in conversion and sanctification. With that information, believers are able to examine their personal experience of the Word and Spirit of God. They can determine the genuineness of their experience by experiment: just as they would prove the presence of carbon dioxide because lime water turns milky. This paper is a brief examination of three interrelated aspects of experimental religion as found in the Westminster Standards, namely the call to faith, assurance, and self-examination.

The Call to Faith

True religious experience ordinarily begins with the gospel. For, as Archibald Alexander writes, “If genuine religious experience is nothing but the impression of divine truth on the mind, by the energy of the Holy Spirit, then it is evident that a knowledge of the truth is essential to genuine piety.”¹

The Westminster *Larger Catechism* puts it this way:

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.²

In the gospel, the Lord freely offers to sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him that they may be saved, and testifying that whosoever believes in Him shall be saved and none who will come to Him will be excluded.³ Not only so, but He also promises to give to all those who are ordained to life His Holy Spirit to make them willing and able to believe:⁴

All those whom God hath predestinated to life, and those only, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted time effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of

¹ Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989) p.xviii.

² *Larger Catechism* 155. [*The Confession of Faith* (1646), *The Larger Catechism* (1648), and *The Shorter Catechism* (1648) are bound together in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow; Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994). References to *The Confession of Faith* (WCF) are made by citing the chapter and section. References to *The Larger Catechism* (LC) and *The Shorter Catechism* (SC) are made by citing the question number.]

³ WCF 7:3; LC 63.

⁴ WCF 7:3.

that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; [convincing them of their sin and misery⁵]; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.

This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.⁶

The faith wrought by the Spirit and the Word of God in the hearts of sinners causes them to be convinced of their sin and of their inability to save themselves. They not only give assent to the truth of the gospel, but also receive and rest upon Christ for their salvation, as He is offered to them in that gospel.⁷ As John Murray says:

Faith is essentially an entrustment to Christ as Lord and Saviour. It is self-commitment to him. It is not the belief that we have been saved, not even the belief that Christ died for us, but the commitment of ourselves to Christ as unsaved, lost, helpless, and undone *in order that we may be saved*. [Emphasis his.]⁸

⁵ *Shorter Catechism (SC)* 31. Archibald Alexander (*Thoughts on Religious Experience*, pp. 15-20) has an interesting discussion of the relation between conviction of sin and regeneration.

⁶ *WCF* 10:1&2.

⁷ *LC* 72; see also *WCF* 14:2.

⁸ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976) Vol. 1, p. 147.

Moreover, those who have been effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them.⁹ They have all saving graces put in their hearts, including the seeds of repentance unto life.¹⁰ By the Word and Spirit working repentance in them, they, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of their sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of God's mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieve for and hate their sins, that they turn from them all to God, purposing and endeavouring constantly to walk with Him in all the ways of new obedience.¹¹

The Call to Assurance

Genuine religious experience, however, does not end with conversion. Faith and repentance continue in the lives of believers; but believers' experiences of God working these graces in their hearts by His word and Spirit are not constant. While faith grows up in many to a full assurance, it may be weak or strong and may be often, and in many ways, assailed.¹² Assurance of salvation does not so belong to the essence of faith that true believers "may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties" before partaking of an infallible assurance of faith.¹³ Again:

True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and

⁹ *WCF* 13:1.

¹⁰ *LC* 75.

¹¹ *LC* 76.

¹² *WCF* 14:3.

¹³ *WCF* 18:3.

suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light:¹⁴

It is also the case that the work of sanctification is imperfect in this life. Because there remain some remnants of corruption in every part of the lives of those effectually called and regenerated, they experience a continual and irreconcilable war between the flesh and the Spirit; and in this war, the remaining corruption may for a time prevail.¹⁵

Then, there is a religious experience which is not saving. There are others who are “outwardly called by the ministry of the word,” and who have some “common operations of the Spirit,” “yet they never truly come to Christ.”¹⁶ O. Palmer Robertson comments:

Just how far the working of the Spirit goes into the soul of those who reject the gospel must remain a mystery beyond the knowledge of men. But the Scriptures indicate that they may “become partakers of the Holy Spirit” (Heb. 6:4). They may taste the heavenly gift, they may taste the goodness of the Word of God, and in some undescribed way they may participate in the reality of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 6:4,5). This description must serve forever as a warning to the presumptuous who would dare to treat lightly the things of God, though it should not be allowed to terrify those who have experienced more than merely a taste of these realities.¹⁷

Clearly, it is not enough to have a religious experience. That experience must be analysed and proven experimentally to

¹⁴ *WCF* 18:4.

¹⁵ *WCF* 13:2&3.

¹⁶ *WCF* 10:4; see also *LC* 61 and *WCF* 18:1.

¹⁷ ‘The Holy Spirit in the Westminster Confession of Faith’ in Ligon Duncan (ed.) *The Westminster Confession of Faith into the 21st Century* (Fearn: Mentor, 2003) Vol 1, p. 82.

determine whether or not it is a saving work of the Spirit. Those who claim an experience of true religion must make their calling and election sure.¹⁸ This is accomplished by self-examination.

The Call to Self-examination

John Murray again states:

The duty of self-examination relates itself particularly to baptized and communicant members of the church. In connection with this subject there is admittedly the danger of morbid introspection. There are true Christians who are so much given to what is called the 'experimental' in religion that they feed to a very large extent upon their own experience. Yet the danger of experientialism does not eliminate the necessity or rightness of self-examination.¹⁹

Murray goes on to give three reasons for its necessity. The first is that no one should take his or her salvation for granted. If those regenerated in infancy are to entertain the assurance and joy of salvation, it is by examining and proving the grounds of their faith and hope. Similarly, for those who have been regenerated in the years of understanding, the assurance of their salvation does not rest upon past experience; therefore, they also must honestly examine the grounds of their faith and hope. The second is that while kirk sessions do not examine men and women to find out what the condition of their hearts is, ministers and elders must inculcate the necessity of their examining themselves, to the end that they may prove themselves and know themselves as the blood-bought possession of Christ (2 Cor. 13:5). The third: "It is not sufficient that members of the church should be true believers and be the heirs of eternal life. It is also necessary that they be self-consciously and intelligently so. (1 John 5:13; 2 Peter 1:10)."²⁰

¹⁸ *WCF* 18:3.

¹⁹ Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. I, pp. 147-148.

²⁰ Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. I, pp. 148-149. For regeneration in infants see Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 2,

By the Spirit's enabling, true believers may detect in themselves the inward evidences of those graces to which the promises of life are made and, from the certainty of their effectual calling, be assured of their election.²¹

Such as truly believe in Christ, and endeavour to walk in all good conscience before him, may, without extraordinary revelation, by the Spirit enabling them to discern in themselves those graces to which the promises of life are made, and bearing witness with their spirits that they are the children of God, be infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace, and shall persevere therein unto salvation.²²

Self-examination is especially associated with receiving the Lord's Supper. That is the context in which the *Larger Catechism* lists areas to be examined:

They that receive the sacrament of the Lord's supper are, before they come, to prepare themselves thereunto, by examining themselves of their being in Christ, of their sins and wants; of the truth and measure of their knowledge, faith, repentance; love to God and the brethren, charity to all men, forgiving those that have done them wrong; of their desires after Christ, and of their new obedience; and by renewing the exercise of these graces, by serious meditation, and fervent prayer.²³

Nevertheless:

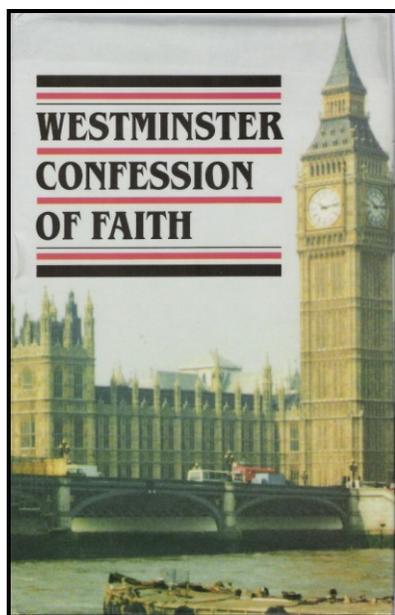
pp. 199-201, Achibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, pp. 10-14, and William Guthrie, *The Christian's Great Interest* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994) pp. 38-39.

²¹ *WCF* 18:2; 3:8.

²² *LC* 80.

²³ *LC* 171.

One who doubteth of his being in Christ, or of his due preparation to the sacrament of the Lord's supper, may have true interest in Christ, though he be not yet assured thereof; and in God's account hath it, if he be duly affected with the apprehension of the want of it, and unfeignedly desires to be found in Christ, and to depart from iniquity: in which case (because promises are made, and this sacrament is appointed, for the relief even of weak and doubting Christians) he is to bewail his unbelief, and labour to have his doubts resolved; and, so doing, he may and ought to come to the Lord's supper, that he may be further strengthened.²⁴



²⁴ LC 172. William Guthrie deals with many of the issues raised in this outline of the experimental religion taught in Westminster Standards in *The Christian's Great Interest*. He identifies the various ways by which men are drawn to Christ. He notes the differences between that preparatory work of the law which leads to salvation and the temporary convictions of those who relapse. He delineates the evidences of saving faith; he writes to strengthen the "one who doubteth"; and for those who find no evidence of a saving work at all, he speaks of how they might come to Christ.

Thus, the *Larger Catechism* is careful to note that it is not great faith, which saves, but faith, no matter how weak, which accepts, receives, and rests upon Christ. It is not the duration or intensity of conviction of sin which makes it a saving work of the Spirit, but the fact that it has driven to Christ.

The *Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* teach that it is the work of God's Word and Spirit in the hearts of His elect which converts, preserves, and saves; but self-examination is essential to the non-presumptuous assurance of that salvation. This is the experimental religion of the Westminster Standards.