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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS AS A CREED

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By Benjamin B. Warfield<sup>1</sup>

FATHERS AND BRETHREN:<sup>2</sup>

It would be difficult for me adequately to express the pleasure which it gives me to respond to your invitation to join with you to-day in celebrating the fifth jubilee of the gift of the Westminster Standards to the world. The task you have laid upon me, of seeking to set forth the significance of that gift, though it has its difficulties arising from its magnitude, cannot fail to appeal powerfully to one who has, in all sincerity and heartiness, set his hand to these Standards as “containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.” It is not merely a duty but a pleasure to bear witness to the truth of God as we apprehend it, and to give a reason from time to time for the faith that is in us. I cannot, indeed, hope to tell over to-day all that the Westminster Standards are to us—to unfold in detail all that has for two centuries and a half made them precious to a body of Christians who have been second to none in intelligence of conviction, evangelistic zeal and faithfulness of confession. But if I were to essay to express in one word what it is in them which has proved so perennial a source of strength to generation after generation of Christian men, and which causes us still to cling to them with a devotion no less intelligent than passionate, I think I should but voice your own conviction were I to say that it is because these precious documents appeal to us as but the embodiment in fitly chosen language of the pure gospel of the grace of God. The high value that we attach to them and that leads us to gather here to-day to remember with gratitude before God the men who gave them to us, and to thank God for this supreme product of their labors, is but the reflection of our conviction that in these forms of words we possess the most complete, the most fully elaborated and carefully guarded, the most perfect, and the most vital expression that has ever been framed by the hand of man, of all that enters into

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921), professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1887-1921. This version from *The Significance of the Westminster Standards as a Creed*, An Address, Delivered before the Presbytery of New York, November 8, 1897, on the occasion of the celebration of the Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the completion of the Westminster Standards (New York, NY: Charles Scribner, 1898), 36 p. Cf. a summary printed under that title in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield—II*, ed. by John E. Meeter (Nutley, NY: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 660-662. Footnotes have been added or elaborated according to contemporary standards by the editor of this version.

<sup>2</sup> The printed version includes the following dedication: “To the Presbytery of New York, at whose appointment it was prepared and before whom it was delivered, this address in its printed form is now dedicated, with an expression of the author’s sense of the honor conferred upon him by their appointment, of his hearty participation in their love for our noble standards, and of his earnest desire that this address, which is both theirs and his, may be used of God in making known in wider circles the true nature of our standards and in intrenching [*sic*] them more deeply in our own hearts.”

what we call evangelical religion, and of all that must be safeguarded if evangelical religion is to persist in the world.

How they came to be this, it is to be my task this afternoon to attempt to recall to our remembrance.

## I

It is a humbling exercise to reflect on the difficulty which has been experienced by the gospel of God's grace—or evangelical religion, as we currently call it nowadays—in establishing and preserving itself in the world. The proclamation of this gospel constitutes the main burden of the Scriptural revelation. And, after the varied and insistent statement which it received at the hands of the great company of inspired men whose writings make up the complex of the Scriptures—and especially after its rich prophetic announcement by Isaiah; its marvelous exposition in the language of living fact in the fourfold narrative of the life of Jesus; its full dialectical development and explanation by Paul, as over against almost every possible misconception; its poignant assertion by John, cut with the sharpness and polished to the brilliancy of a gem—one might well suppose that it had been made the permanent possession of men, etched into the very substance of human thought with such boldness that even he that ran could not fail to read it, with such depth that it could never again be erased or obscured. But it was not so. There is no other such gulf in the history of human thought as that which is cleft between the apostolic and the immediately succeeding ages. To pass from the latest apostolic writings to the earliest compositions of uninspired Christian pens, is to fall through such a giddy height that it is no wonder if we rise dazed and almost unable to determine our whereabouts. Here is the great fault—as the geologists would say—in the history of Christian doctrine. There is every evidence of continuity—but, oh, at how much lower a level! The rich vein of evangelical religion has run well-nigh out; and, though there are masses of apostolic origin lying everywhere, they are but fragments, and are evidently only the talus<sup>3</sup> which has fallen from the cliffs above and scattered itself over the lowered surface. Thus it came about that the deposit of divine truth in the apostolic revelation did not supply the starting-point of the development of doctrine in the church, but has rather from the beginning stood before it as the goal to which it was painfully to climb.

Through how many ages men needed to struggle slowly upward before they even measurably recovered the lost elevation! No doubt the essence of evangelical religion remained the implicit possession of every truly Christian heart, and this implicit presence of so great a light lent a glow to every Christian age. No doubt the constituent elements of evangelical doctrine found disjointedly more or less explicit recognition at the hands of every really great Christian thinker, and we may piece these fragments together into a mosaic picture of the real Christian heart of each period. No doubt there persisted everywhere and always an instinctive protest, fed by the Word and quickened by the demands of the Christian life, against the deteriorated conceptions of the day; and this protest flared up from time to time into a flame of vehement resistance to some more than usually widespread, or some more than usually aggressive, or some more than usually deadly assault upon some essential element of that truth by which alone men could live, and would not be allayed until the whole truth in question had been brought to clear consciousness and guarded expression. Early monuments of such struggles for fundamental elements of evangelical religion we possess in

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<sup>3</sup> Eds. note: "talus," rock rubble at the base of a cliff.

those forms of sound words which we know as the Nicene Creed<sup>4</sup> and the Chalcedonian formulary,<sup>5</sup> in which the evangelical doctrines of the Trinity in Unity and of the Person of Christ receive such lucid, comprehensive, and circumspect statement as has safeguarded them through all subsequent time, and against every hitherto conceivable encroachment of misbelief. But it was not until four centuries had dragged by that, in reaction upon an incredibly audacious onslaught upon the very core of evangelical religion, the Church was enabled to rise upon the broad and strong wings of a great religious genius, to something like a full-orbed apprehension of the treasures she possessed in the gospel of God's grace.

Augustine compassed for her the privilege of this splendid vision, and for a season she basked in its glory. But what that generation thus achieved, it lacked the power fully to secure for its successors. It fixed its own attainments in no firmly outlined and detailed formulary of ecumenical authority; and it had not itself passed away before the lines drawn so sharply and boldly by the master-hand of Augustine began to fade again out of the consciousness of men. We can trace the increasing obscurity from age to age. Not more than a century had elapsed before the tenacity and distinctness with which the gospel in its entirety was grasped had so far relaxed, that it was possible even for the best Christians of the time, men like the great and good Caesarius,<sup>6</sup> to betray it into one of those futile and fatal compromises with its persistent enemy which have proved in all ages the snare of good men and the ruin of the truth. No wonder that three centuries later it lay languishing and dying in chains in the person of one who nobly bore the fit name of the "Servant of God,"<sup>7</sup> and to whose honor, as to a light shining in a dark place, we should do well to pause to pay some grateful tribute to-day. Then the pall of ecclesiasticism was dragged over the corpse, and the dense primeval night seemed to have settled again upon the face of the earth.

But it is a long night that knows no dawn; and just when the darkness seemed most hopeless, a streak of light appears again on the horizon and the sun springs suddenly up and climbs the heavens. The Reformation we call it: Zwingli, Luther, Calvin—these are its heralds: and what it really is is the gospel of God's grace brought back to earth. Ah! how men greet it! Crushed under the weight of their sin, with nothing but their poor, human strength to lift it, and nought reached to their help but the hand of a church much too obviously human, how joyously they welcome

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<sup>4</sup> Eds. note: "Nicene Creed," promulgated in 325 by the Council of Nicea to defend the orthodox faith against the Arian heresy. The term "Nicene Creed," however, is also used of that longer creed, adopted by the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.), most commonly used in the churches. Warfield undoubtedly refers to the latter.

<sup>5</sup> A "definition" adopted by the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) affirming that the Lord Jesus Christ is one person, "recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ. . . ."

<sup>6</sup> Eds. note: Caesarius of Arles (470-543). Bishop of Arles. He presided over the Second Council of Orange (529) that condemned the false doctrine concerning grace known as Semi-pelagianism. There is good reason for believing that the council's decrees represent a work (otherwise lost) attributed to Caesarius. It is noteworthy that in the preface to the acts of the council, the participants say that they are assembled at the suggestion and by the authority of the Apostolic See, from which they have received certain propositions or decrees, gathered by the ancient Fathers from the Scriptures concerning the matter in hand; as a matter of fact the decrees of the council are taken almost word for word from Augustine. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. III, s.v.

<sup>7</sup> Fulgentius Goteschaleus = "illustrious servant of God." Eds. note: A reference to Gottschalk (c. 805-869), theologian and monk, whose studies in Augustine and Fulgentius led him to teach "double predestination." Though defended by a number of notable theologians, Gottschalk was condemned by the Synods of Mainz (848) and Quiercy (849), deposed, flogged, and imprisoned for life at the monastery of Hautvilliers, near Reims, France.

again the outstretched hand of God! And how the glad news spreads until all Europe is filled with its echo, and men everywhere rise from the ashes of their despondency, stretch themselves awake, put on new courage, and go forward in the hope of God. Surely now, we will say, flung into the midst of this mass of awakened men, with the memory of their despair fresh on them and the experience of their deliverance keen in their hearts, the gospel has come to stay. But no: the clouds at once gather again. Melancthon himself, trusted helper and worthy companion of Luther, first systematic expounder of the newly recovered gospel, Melancthon himself readmits the old “evil leaven of synergism,”<sup>8</sup> and, amid the turmoils that ensue, the Lutheran churches succeed in only partially recovering the lost ground. They are able, accordingly, to establish themselves, not on the pure gospel of the grace of God, but as their *Formula Concordiae*<sup>9</sup> witnesses, only on a somewhat neutral territory over which the old humanitarianism<sup>10</sup> could urge some sort of claim. Thus these churches lost the hope of giving its final and complete formulation to the principles of evangelical religion.

Meanwhile, in the grace of God, better things were being wrought by the Reformed. They it was who were most cruelly ground under the heel of the oppressor; they it was, consequently, who most passionately cast their hearts’ hope upon the God of salvation. And so, all over the Reformed world, voices were raised giving expression to the doctrines of grace with a fulness, a richness, an absoluteness never before known. Reformed Confessions sprang up everywhere in a luxuriant growth, written often by the hands of martyrs, wet always with their blood, and each and all declaring through martyr lips, which spoke not only in the fear of God but out of ardent love to Him, and face to face as dying men with their Judge and their Redeemer, all the words of this life. It is a century of struggle and suffering which is distilled into these Confessions—a century of patient endurance and faithful testimony which, in their glowing and uncompromising language, speaks out, with a firmness and clearness and fulness never before attained, the principles of that gospel by which alone the soul can live, and the full sweetness and strength of which men taste only in times like those. At last the gospel had come to its rights; at last men seemed to have laid hold upon it with a clearness of apprehension and an ardor of embrace which could never more be loosed.

But the treasure was not even yet to be retained without a final and supreme struggle. One evil had hitherto been spared the Reformed Churches. Every conceivable assault had been made upon them from without, but no serious internal treason had as yet endangered the purity of their confession. With the second century of their existence even this trial was to fall upon them. It came in what we know as the Remonstrant Controversy, in which the old humanitarian conceptions, the violent assertion of which had been the occasion of Augustine’s republication of the gospel of grace, and by the more measured and subtle working of which evangelical religion had been gradually throttled in the Latin Church, reappeared in the very bosom of the Reformed Churches themselves and jeopardized the purity of their assertion of the gospel. We all know how

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<sup>8</sup> Eds. note: “synergism,” the doctrine in that the human will and the Holy Spirit work together to bring about regeneration.

<sup>9</sup> Eds. note: “*Formula Concordiae*,” Formula of Concord, the 1577 Lutheran confession which settled the doctrinal controversies concerning, among other topics, synergism, free will, and conversion, within German Lutheranism after Luther’s death.

<sup>10</sup> Eds. note: “humanitarianism,” Warfield uses this term for any theology that allows salvation to depend upon unaided human effort.

the new danger was transcended. Met in ecumenical synod at Dort,<sup>11</sup> the Reformed Churches gave renewed and serious consideration, in the light of Scripture alone, to those elements of evangelical religion to which exception had been taken, and with one tongue, voicing the testimony of the whole Reformed world, bore their solemn witness to them as essential elements in the gospel of God's grace. But the end was not even yet. Transferred to English ground the assault was continued for a third of a century longer under circumstances which gave it the highest conceivable force and speciousness. Here sacerdotalism,<sup>12</sup> in the form of Anglican prelacy,<sup>13</sup> presented itself in the disguise of the Reformed religion itself. Here humanitarianism put on the garments of light, allied itself with religious fervor, and ran up by insensible stages into a mysticism which confounded human claims with the very voice of God. This is the meaning of what we call the Puritan Conflict which, from the theological side, was nothing else than the last deadly struggle of evangelical religion—the gospel of God's grace—to preserve itself pure and sweet and clean in the midst of the most insidious attacks which could be brought against it—attacks, the strength of which resided just in the fact that now its old-time foes approached it with the sword in hand, indeed, and with no loss of their undying hatred, but under its own banner and clothed in its own uniform.

It was a battle to the death; and the arts of war could not but be learned in its progress. To meet so protean a foe, attacking at every point with weapons of unexampled fineness and tactics of unimagined subtlety, a skill of fence and a wariness of defence unknown before were necessarily developed; and, with them, those high qualities which underlie them—keenness of perception, clearness of vision, firmness of purpose, accuracy of aim, precision of movement straight to the essential goal. Men trained in this school could not be content with merely general statements of the truth by which they lived, and which would long since have been wrested from them had they held to it with only a broad and, therefore, loose grasp. In the strenuousness of the conflict they had not only learned how to state the gospel sharply, distinctly, precisely; they had, so to speak, lost the power of stating it otherwise than with clearness and exactitude and force. As well expect the veteran fresh from the wars to bungle in his fence; nay, his blade takes instinctively the correct attitude of guard, and eye and wrist move in such organic harmony that it would be only with an effort that either could prove false to its fellow. As well expect the mountaineer who has trodden

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<sup>11</sup> Synod of Dort, 1618-19, held in the Netherlands town of Dordrecht, the synod produced the Canons of Dort, affirming the doctrines of grace (in what would come to be called the "Five Points of Calvinism") against the followers of Arminius known as Remonstrants.

<sup>12</sup> Eds. note: "sacerdotalism," priest-ism. "[I]t has yet been taught in a large portion of the Church . . . that God in working salvation does not operate upon the human soul directly but indirectly; that is to say, through instrumentalities which he has established as the means by which his saving grace is communicated to men. As these instrumentalities are committed to human hands for their administration, a human factor is thus intruded between the saving grace of God and its effective operation in the souls of men; and this human factor indeed, is made the determining factor in salvation. Against this Sacerdotal system, as it is appropriately called, the whole Protestant Church, in all its parts, Lutheran and Reformed, Calvinistic and Arminian, raises its passionate protest. In the interests of the pure supernaturalism of salvation it insists that God the Lord himself works by his grace immediately on the souls of men, and has not suspended any man's salvation upon the faithfulness or caprice of his fellows. . . . Protestantism suspends the welfare of the soul directly, without any intermediaries at all, upon the grace of God alone. The sacerdotal principle finds very complete expression in the thoroughly developed and logically compacted system of the Church of Rome. According to this system God the Lord does nothing looking to the salvation of men directly and immediately: all that he does for the salvation of men he does through the mediation of the Church, to which, having endowed it with powers adequate to the task, he has committed the whole work of salvation." Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1915).

<sup>13</sup> Eds. note: "prelacy," referring to a church ruled by high-ranking members of the clergy.

the peaks from infancy to stumble heavily over his arrêtes and passes; he knows not how to do otherwise than to step cleanly and surely and firmly, and he instinctively plants his feet where they cannot be moved. So, when this company of Puritan pastors was gathered from the parishes of England which they had saved for the gospel, and was bidden, "Write down this gospel," they could not do otherwise than write it down with that rich completeness which had nourished their own souls and the souls of their flocks in those times of conflict and often almost of despair, and with that precision in which alone it could preserve its integrity and power in the face of the violent and insidious foes to the attacks of which it had been, in their own experience, exposed.

It is because the Westminster Standards are the product of such men, working under such circumstances, that they embody the gospel of the grace of God with a carefulness, a purity, and an exactness never elsewhere achieved, and come to us as, historically, the final fixing in confessional language of the principles and teachings of evangelical religion. Sixteen centuries of struggle toward the pure apprehension of the gospel lay behind them, culminating in that ultimate proclamation of evangelical truth which we call the Reformation. More specifically, a hundred and fifty years of the development of Reformed theology lay behind them, culminating in the vindication of the purity of the gospel by the Reformed world as over against the Remonstrant adulterations. Most specifically of all, there lay behind them the half century of the Puritan conflict—a half century of working and polishing the jewel of the gospel beneath every hammer that the cruelty of men, and every chisel and file that the ingenuity of men could devise, until it was beaten and cut into the most compact and sharply outlined possible expression of the pure gospel of the grace of God. It is to these historical conditions of their origin that the Westminster Standards owe their high significance and value. Historically speaking, this is the significance of the Westminster Standards as a creed.

## II

But when we thus say that the historical origin of the Westminster Standards operated directly to give them peculiar completeness and precision as a statement of the gospel, that is as much as to say that they appeal to us not more because they are historically the ultimate crystallization of the principles of evangelical religion, than because of the high scientific perfection which they attain, considered as a product of human thought, in their statement of these principles. The scientific quality of the Chalcedonian formulary, for example, was not due to any speculative interest dominating the minds of its framers, nor to any singular speculative ability characterizing them, but to the thoroughness with which the whole problem with which the document deals was threshed out in the course of the keen and prolonged controversies which preceded its formulation and prepared the material for its use. This effect is not best expressed by representing the vital processes which go on in a long discussion, affecting the basis of the religious life, as simulating in their results a scientific product; it would be more nearly correct to conceive the processes of scientific statement as imitating, and that at a considerable interval, the work of organic controversy. The scientific investigator makes all due effort carefully to consider every possible solution of the problem brought before him, candidly to weigh every conceivable element which may affect the result, and thoroughly to canvass every combination of the elements possible to imagine; and he hopes, by strenuous diligence, watchful impartiality and thorough manipulation of his material, to reach a result which will do full justice to all considerations, and which will therefore stand permanently in the face of all criticism. But it would seem to be obvious that such a sifting and weighing cannot go on in a single coolly working mind with anything like the same searching

completeness, or ultimate in anything like the same perfection of result, as when they take place in the caldron of an aroused and deeply moved mass of men striving earnestly to comprehend and express the elements of their faith. Scientific construction, therefore, bears to vital processes in this sphere, too, very much the same relation as in chemical synthesis: not until the manipulation of the laboratory can outdo the subtle alchemy of life can we expect scientific care to surpass living controversy in producing a truly scientific statement of vital truth. Whenever the elements east into the crucible of life include all those that enter into the case, and the ferment is violent enough and sufficiently long continued, we may expect the ultimate eliminations and combinations to be in the highest sense natural—that is to run on the lines of essential rightness—and the final crystallization to be a scientific product of the first quality. It is to the fact that just this was the process by which the Westminster Standards came into being that they owe their high scientific character.

For, consider how richly represented in the religious life of Europe during the formative period of the Reformed theology, and especially in the religious life of Britain during the era when the Westminster theology was in preparation, were all those constructions which can with any show of attractiveness be given to the Christian religion. I think it may be said that there are only three main forms in which this religion may be plausibly presented to the acceptance of men; which can acquire—certainly which have ever acquired—a completeness, a self-consistency, a power of presentation, such as tend to give them any extended empire over men's minds. We may, for our convenience, label these the Sacerdotal, the Humanitarian, and the Evangelical Gospel;<sup>14</sup> and it is among them that the battle of the faith must needs be fought out. Possibly there never will be a time when all three will not, in one form or another, be represented in the world; certainly up to to-day, and apparently as far into the future as our conjecture can penetrate, the supreme task of each has been and will continue to be to make good its position as over against the other two, and to protect its territory from absorption by them. Every attack that has ever been made, or apparently can ever be made, upon evangelical religion—be it as violent or as insidious as it may—will, on analysis, be found to be a more or less gross, or a more or less subtle, manifestation of one or the other of these opposing tendencies. No statement of evangelical religion can stand, therefore, which does not differentiate it, and in differentiating protect it, from these its two perennial and ever-encroaching foes. And the statement that does perfectly differentiate it from them both will be the highest and most perfect scientific statement of which evangelical religion is capable.

It was thus incident to the historical circumstances of their origin that the Westminster Standards should attain the high-water mark of a differentiated statement of the elements of evangelical religion. For the most complete and the most powerful embodiment of the sacerdotal tendency is found, of course, in the church of Rome; and never was this tendency so active in its propaganda, so impassioned, so filled with the courage of intense conviction and utter devotion as in those days of the Counter-Reformation, when the Jesuit hosts flung themselves into the work of recovering every inch of the ground lost in the Protestant revolt with a fiery zeal and a fertility of resource which remain until to-day the wonder and example of the world. And while the most complete embodiment of the humanitarian tendency is to be sought in more extreme developments, such as for example Socinianism or rationalizing naturalism, to the workings of which the Reformed Churches were no strangers; its most effective elaboration within the limits of a church

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<sup>14</sup> Eds. note: The printed edition has "Gospels," plural, but in every other instance throughout the essay Warfield contrasts the opposing views with the "gospel," singular. The singular certainly more perfectly captures Warfield's thought and is likely original, the former being a typographical error.

claiming to believe in God and His Christ, has ever exhibited itself in that great middle system which under the name of Semi-Pelagianism early allied itself with Roman ecclesiasticism and in later Romanism became the characterizing feature of the Jesuit theology, and which broke out afresh in the churches of the Reformation in the forms of Lutheran synergism and Remonstrant humanism and sought to poison the fountains of evangelical religion in their sources. The simple enumeration of these facts will serve to indicate the fires in which the Reformed theology was forged. It would have been a marvel had it emerged from its century of conflict with these forces without having been beaten into something like shape. There was indeed but a single alternative open: that it should be crushed out of existence and pounded into the dust that is spurned by the foot of man, or else that it should come forth from the forging compacted into adamant and polished into perfection.

And yet the process of the forging of that exquisite product of scientific theology which we call the Westminster Standards is but half revealed when we recite these broad facts. It was under those hammers that the Reformed theology was beaten into that perfected shape in which it lay in the minds of its adherents throughout Europe in the seventeenth century. Thus it was fashioned into the noble shape in which it was spoken out by the assembled Reformed world at the Synod of Dort or by the Swiss theologians in their *Formula Consensus*.<sup>15</sup> and thus it would have been spoken out in every centre of Reformed life in all Europe, from Scotland to Hungary. It was already in a high and true sense a finished product. But in a higher and finer sense there was a finish yet to be given it: a finish which could be acquired only by passage through the yet more severe ordeal that awaited it on English ground. There can be no need to recite again the details of the story of how narrow the lines were there drawn within which he must walk who would preserve his good confession: of how sacerdotalism seized the reins of the Reformed Church of England itself and drove rough-shod over the hearts and consciences of her only faithful children; of how, in the dreadful confusion of the times, humanitarian self-assertiveness obtained control of some of the finest spiritual sinew in the land and set it to demolishing the foundations of the gospel. No wonder that many of the very elect were deceived and lost the purity of their testimony. But no wonder, on the other hand, that those who endured, because—how else?—they saw the Invisible One and in the light of that Vision were enabled to keep the word of God's patience, emerged from the ordeal as from a furnace seven times heated, purified and refined and shaking the very smell of the smoke from their undefiled garments. These were they, who, sitting in solemn conclave in the Jerusalem Chamber,<sup>16</sup> gave forth that serious expression of the faith by which they lived which we call the Westminster Standards: and this is the reason why this their enunciation of the elements of the gospel of God's grace has a perfection of finish upon it elsewhere unattained,—which could not have been equaled by the work of any other body of men then on the face of the earth, which we can never hope to surpass, and which we can lightly lose or rashly cast from us only when our grasp upon evangelical religion becomes weak or our love for it grows cold.

It belongs to the very essence of the situation that an enunciation of the elements of the gospel, springing out of such conditions, should be supremely well guarded from the sides of both its most obdurate foes,—between which it was at the time, only by the greatest circumspection,

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<sup>15</sup> Eds. note: *Formula Consensus Helvetica*, composed at Zurich, 1675, by John Henry Heidegger, of Zurich, assisted by Francis Turretine, of Geneva, and Luke Gernler, of Basle, and designed to condemn and excluded that modified form of Calvinism, which, in the seventeen century, emanated from the theological school at Saumur, represented by Amyrault, Placæus, and Daille.

<sup>16</sup> Eds. note: "Jerusalem Chamber," the hall in Westminster Abby in London where the Westminster Divines met for their general sessions.



preserving itself from being crushed, as between the upper and nether millstones. No wonder, then, that even the most cursory reader of the Westminster Standards is impressed with the exquisite precision and balance of their statements, with the clearness and purity with which they bring out just the essence of the gospel, and the drastic thoroughness with which they separate from it every remainder of sacerdotal and humanitarian leaven. To read over a chapter or two of the Westminster Confession gives one fresh from the obscurities and confusions of much modern theological discussion a mental feeling very nearly akin to the physical sensation of washing one's hands and face after a hot hour's work. Here the truth is shelled out clean. No doubt there are those whose perverted appetites seem to like more or less chaff in their bread, and who may therefore manage to take offence at this very perfection of statement. And it may be easy to find fault with what we may be pleased to call the polemic flavor of documents so formulated, and to ask whether it is not time to smooth out the frowns of war from our countenance and to speak out our testimony to the gospel of love with the unbroken serenity of a universal peace. As if truth could ever be stated without offence to falsehood: as if the very essence of definition lay not in exclusion: as if it were not self-evident that perfect and clean inclusion must always work equally perfect and clean exclusion, and the more complete and perfect the exclusion the more complete and perfect the definition. The wall that protects the citadel must needs be too narrow in its compass to enclose the foeman's camp as well: the flask that preserves the precious essence must needs be tight enough to shut out corrupting germs. The Westminster fathers placed nothing in their Standards which they did not think worth fighting for,—nay, which they had not already been called upon to fight for; and it marks the height of their service that they have given it a form securely guarded on every side, on the well-polished surface of which, in particular, the chiefest and most persistent foes of the gospel will seek in vain for a foothold.

So long, then, as the leavens of sacerdotalism and humanitarianism—of externality in religion and of dependence on flesh—remain, in one form or another, the most dangerous perils to which the gospel is exposed (and it would seem as if this must be as long as human nature endures), so long the statement given the gospel of grace in the Westminster Standards must remain the ultimate scientific enunciation of the principles of evangelical religion. In the same sense in which the Nicene and Athanasian creeds attained the final expression of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Chalcedonian definition the final expression of the doctrine of the Person of Christ, the Westminster Standards attained the final expression of the elements of evangelical religion. Of course, nothing like divine inspiration is attributed to any of these documents; nor is it necessary to invoke any special or peculiar divine superintendence over their production, though he who believes in a God will not fail to perceive His providential working, nor will he who believes in the God of the Bible fail to perceive the fulfilment of His promises, in such supreme products of human thought on divine things as these. What we discover on the surface of these documents, however, is the product of historical processes and of historical conditions which not only enabled but compelled their framers firmly to grasp in all their relations and clearly, cleanly, and guardedly to express the truths with which they deal. They mark, in a word, epochs in the history of human reflection on the truths of the gospel—epochs in the attainment and registry of special truths; and they, therefore, in the nature of the case, give these special truths their complete and final scientific expression. All subsequent attempts to restate them can but repeat these older statements—which were struck out when the fires were hot and the iron was soft—or else fall helplessly away from the purity of their conceptions or the justness of their language. In this fact resides, scientifically speaking, the significance of the Westminster Standards as a creed.

## III

It is sufficiently clear that a scientific statement of truth, originating in the manner described and owing its scientific character not merely to closet reflection but to the interaction of the varied interests and requirements of men's souls, need not—nay, cannot—lack in vital quality. It will necessarily bear in its very fibre a coloring from the heart. A product of the intensest intellectual activity, and exhibiting in its forms of statement the niceties of scientific construction, it is nevertheless the product of intellect working only under impulse from and dictation of the heart, and in its very forms of statement will be the vehicle of the expression of the needs and attainments of the spiritual life. And thus it comes about that the Westminster Standards appeal to us not merely as, historically, the deposited faith of the best age of evangelical development, and not merely as, scientifically, the most thoroughly thought out and most carefully guarded statement ever penned of the elements of evangelical religion, but also as, vitally, filled with the expressed essence and breathing the finest fragrance of spiritual religion.

They gravely err who picture to themselves the fathers to whom we owe the formulation of any of the great doctrines of our religion as dominated by merely speculative interests, or nerved for their task mainly by metaphysical considerations. It has never been so. Restless speculation and philosophical pretension have ever been rather the boasts and, let us frankly admit it, the characteristic possessions of the purveyors of heresies and the fomenters of those fatal conciliations with the thought of the world which have, from the beginning, been the bane of the Church and one of the most serious perils of the gospel. It is not only in the infancy of Christianity that it has been a true testimony that “Not many wise are called.”<sup>17</sup> A certain speculative inertness, we might almost say, has marked the Church, and even those to whom God, in His providence, has committed the formulation of its treasures of truth, until, goaded into action by intolerable assaults on the very penetralium of their spiritual life, their minds have taken fire from their hearts and risen to compass and proclaim the elements of the higher wisdom of God. The accents which smite our ears, out of our creeds, with such tremendous emphasis do not indicate the crisp, cold, sharp movements of mere intellection; they are the pulsations of great hearts heaving in emotion and rising to the assertion of the precious truth by which they live. If we read them as merely speculative discriminations, the fault lies in us, not in them. It is because our hearts cannot, like theirs, stand up and answer, “We have felt!”<sup>18</sup> The scoffer who mocks, for example, at the Nicene fathers wrangling over a mere iota in framing their definition of the Trinitarian relation,<sup>19</sup> but uncovers the poverty of his own spiritual life and betrays the shallowness of his own religious experience. He that knows his Lord, that has in his periods of despair fled to His sheltering arms and in his periods of comfort rested upon His bosom, I do not say will not, I say cannot, abate one jot or one tittle of his passionate assertion of His divine majesty. We treat these cleanly cut and nicely balanced phrases as if they were intellectualistic scales weighing minute differences of merely speculative

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<sup>17</sup> Eds. note: 1 Corinthians 1:26.

<sup>18</sup> “A warmth within the breast would melt  
The freezing reason's colder part,  
And like a man in wrath the heart  
Stood up and answer'd, 'I have felt!'”

—*In Memoriam*, cxxiv. Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

<sup>19</sup> This is the difference between the orthodox formula (ὁμοούσιος) and the semi-Arian (ὁμοιοούσιος); the decided Arian affirmed ἕτεροούσιος. Of course, the whole doctrine of the Trinity in Unity and of the proper Deity of Christ resides in the iota.

import, only because, and only so long as, we have not vitally experienced the spiritual truths which underlie them, to which they give just expression and for which they form the bulwarks. “Nothing could be more mistaken,” says Professor Sabatier in one of his lapses into sound reason,<sup>20</sup> “than to represent the fathers of the councils or the members of the synods as theorists, or even as professional theologians, brought together in conference by speculative zeal alone in order to resolve metaphysical enigmas. They were men of action, not of speculation; courageous priests and pastors who thought of their work as like that of soldiers in open battle, and who were ready to die as one dies for his country.” The creeds have been given to the Church, not by philosophers but by the shepherds of the flocks, who loved the sheep; not in a speculative but in a practical interest; not to advance or safeguard what we may speak of as merely intellectual, but distinctively spiritual needs: and to every seeing eye—that is, to every eye open to spiritual vision—they bear their corresponding appearance.

Of no creed is all this more true than of the Westminster Standards. Perhaps I may even venture to say, of no creed is it true in an equal measure as of the Westminster Standards. Men of learning they were, no doubt, who framed these standards; men of speculative power and philosophical grasp; men who were the heirs of all the Christian ages, and who had consciously entered into their inheritance; in whose minds were stored the well-ordered fruits of serious study of the whole product of Christian thought and living up to their time.<sup>21</sup> But their chief claim to greatness does not lie in this. “Some of the Assembly,” is the testimony of one who, though not in sympathy with them, strives hard to do them justice—“some of the Assembly were great men; most of them were sincerely good.”<sup>22</sup> They were above and before all else—and that too consciously to themselves—men of God, men of strenuous and devout lives, who had known what it was to suffer for Christ’s sake, and who spared not themselves in the work of His vineyard. They were, in one word, just a picked body of Puritan pastors—“the flower of the Puritan clergy,” as the secular historian calls them<sup>23</sup>—the best men of the best age of British Protestantism. And they were met together not to air their conceits, but to save the good ship of the Church of England alike from the rocks of sacerdotalism and the shoals of humanitarianism on one or the other of which it seemed likely to founder; and above all, to speak out heartily and without circumlocution, all the words of the Divine life. It results, therefore, from the very nature of the case that it is above everything else a religious document which they have given us—a document phrased in theological language, no doubt, as all religious instruments must be, for such is the language of religion when seeking to express itself in terms of thought—but a document which, in the highest and most distinctive sense of those words, is a religious document; a document transfused with the very spirit of the age of religious revival which gave it birth,<sup>24</sup> and bearing to every age which will receive it the

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<sup>20</sup> Auguste Sabatier (1839-1901), *Discours sur l’évolution des dogmes*, pp. 23, 24.

<sup>21</sup> “It was an age of great religious knowledge, and now for thirty years of free and violent discussion.” J.B. Marsden, *The History of the Later Puritans from the Opening of the Civil War in 1642 to the Ejection of the Non-conforming Clergy in 1662* (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1852), p. 53. “The Presbyterian party [in the Assembly, *i.e.*, the great majority] were not ordinary men, nor men of fickle minds. . . . Most of them left to the world some records of ministerial ability, of solid learning, and of zeal and piety, which time has not destroyed.” *Ibid.*, p. 64. On the knowledge and power displayed by the Westminster Divines in the work of preaching, see p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> Marsden, *History of the Later Puritans*, p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> S.R. Gardiner, *History of the Great Civil War, 1642-1649*, 4 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1893), I:272. “It [the Assembly of Divines] comprised the flower of the Puritan clergy.”

<sup>24</sup> Eds. note: cf. J.I. Packer, “Puritanism as a Movement of Revival,” in *A Quest For Godliness. The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), pp. 35-48.

spirit of devotion enshrined in its bosom. Speaking of the Puritans of London, one of the soberest of historians is forced to give utterance to the admiring cry that “aiming to be a saint, each man unconsciously became a hero.”<sup>25</sup> The description may be applied in an eminent sense to the divines of the Westminster Assembly. If they have become intellectual heroes to us, as we wonder over the solidity and circumspection of their theological structure, it is not because their prime aim was scholastic. They wrote these definitions aiming before all things to be saints: is it strange that we see the saint through the theologian and have our hearts warmed by the contact? Certain it is that the Westminster Standards have a spiritual significance to us which falls in no wise short of their historical and scientific significance.

Open these standards where you will and you will not fail to feel the throb of an elevated and noble spiritual life pulsing through them. They are not merely a notably exact scientific statement of the elements of the gospel: they are, in the strictest sense of the words, the very embodiment of the gospel. They not only know what God is; they know God: and they make their readers know Him—know Him in His infinite majesty, in His exalted dominion, in His unlimited sovereignty, in the immutability of His purpose and His almighty power and universal providence, but know Him also in that strangest, most incomprehensible of all His perfections, the unfathomableness of His love. Their description of Him transcends the just limits of mere definition and swells into a paean of praise—praise to Him who is “most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.”<sup>26</sup> And how profound their knowledge is of the heart of man—its proneness to evil, its natural aversion to spiritual good, its slowness of response to spiritual influence, the deviousness of its path even under the leading of the Holy Ghost. But, above all, they know, with a fulness of apprehension which startles and instructs and blesses the reader, the ways of God with the errant souls of men—how He has condescended to open the way to them of having fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, how He has redeemed them unto Himself in the blood of His Son, and how He deals with them, as only a loving Father may, in disciplining and fitting them for the heavenly glory. Where elsewhere may we find more vitally set forth the whole circle of experience in the Christian life—what conversion is and how God operates in bringing the soul to knowledge of Him and faith in its Saviour, what are the joys of justifying grace and of adoption into the family of God, and what the horrors of those temporary lapses that lie in wait for unwary steps, and what the inconceivable tenderness of God’s gracious dealings with the stumbling and trembling spirit until He brings it safely home? Who can read those searching chapters on Perseverance and Assurance without feeling his soul burn within him, or without experience of a new influx of courage and patience for the conflicts of life? It is not a singular experience which Dr. Thornwell records, when he sets down in his journal his thanksgiving to God for this blessed Confession. “I bless God,” he writes, “for that glorious summary of Christian doctrine contained in our noble Standards. It has cheered my soul in many a dark hour, and sustained me in many a desponding moment.” We do not so much require as delight, with consentient mind, in his testimony, when he declares that he knows of “no uninspired production in any language, or of any denomination, that for richness of matter, soundness of doctrine, scriptural expression and edifying tendency can for a moment enter into competition with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.”<sup>27</sup> The Westminster Standards, in a word, are notable monuments of the

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<sup>25</sup> Marsden, *History of the Later Puritans*, p. 111.

<sup>26</sup> Eds. note: Westminster Confession of Faith, II.1.

<sup>27</sup> B.M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL.D.* (Richmond: Whittet & Shep-  
erson, 1875); reprint (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), pp. 162, 165.

religious life as well as of theological definition, and, speaking from the point of view of vital religion, this is their significance as a creed.

#### CONCLUSION

I have sought, fathers and brothers, nothing more than to indicate, with a brevity suitable to the nature of the occasion, what may be thought to be the chief sources of the significance of the Westminster Standards as a creed—to suggest in broad outline why, after two centuries and a half, they are still enshrined in the affections of the churches which have been blessed by their possession, and why we feel impelled to gather here to-day to express before the world our sense of benefits received from them and of satisfaction in them. It would be easy to enlarge upon the theme. It would be easy to show, for example, how freely the best thought of the best age of Protestantism was poured into them; how fully and genially they represent the *consensus* of Reformed doctrine in its most developed and most catholic form; how strictly they are held in every definition to the purity of the Biblical conceptions and enunciations of truth. These and similar grounds of appeal to our admiration and acceptance may be considered, however, to be implicitly included in what has been broadly adduced, and we may agree that the hold of the Westminster Standards upon our hearts and suffrages is due proximately to the facts that we see in them, historically speaking, the final crystallization of the very essence of evangelical religion—scientifically speaking, the richest and most precise and best guarded statement possessed by man, of all that enters into evangelical religion and of all that must be safeguarded if evangelical religion is to persist in the world—religiously speaking, the very expressed essence of vital religion. Surely blessed are the churches which feed upon this meat! Surely the very possession of Standards like these differentiates the fortunate churches which have inherited them as those best furnished for the word and work of the Christian proclamation and the Christian life. May God Almighty infuse their strength into our bones and their beauty into our flesh, and enable us to justify our inheritance by unfolding into life, in all its completeness and richness and divinity, the precious gospel which they have enfolded for us in their protecting envelope of sound words!