A COMPARISON OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM WITH THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION AND THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

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INTRODUCTION

One of the more important issues that has been debated among Christians is the validity of a creed as a means of setting forth and proclaiming one's Christian faith. In regard to this problem I have seen Christians divided both on the mission field and also here in America. Those who tend to emphasize the subjective and experiential aspects of Christianity will, as a rule, minimize if not deny the need for creeds as organs of Christian confession. They will argue from the premise that the acid test of one's Christian faith is not what he confesses with his mouth, but rather what he feels in his heart and expresses by his manner of life. On the other hand, those who stress the objective facts of God's self-revelation in history, particularly in the person of Jesus Christ, and who feel that any experience of our own must be firmly rooted in this objective historical revelation, will usually see the necessity of setting forth a statement proclaiming just what are understood to be the important factors in that revelation. Such a statement or creed will represent the faith of a group of Christians who have bound themselves together by a common interpretation of the Word of God, a common agreement as to what the Bible says to them. The initial purpose of such creeds may be various. Some have been formulated primarily as a means of instructing the youth. Others have expressed a protest against an older church which has tried to enforce conformity to its faith. Still others have been formulated as criteria for testing the faith of prospective new members. But for a general definition which will serve our purposes, we believe that Stewart's will be very satisfactory: "Creeds are the Documents, of a more or less official character, in which the Christian Church, or the various branches of it, have set down, as they have understood them, the facts and principles which they regarded as most fundamental, as lying at the root of their common religious life."1

Thus it is that although groups have arisen from time to time which have decried the value of written symbols, the great streams of Protestant Christianity have believed it necessary to set forth such statements as testimonies to the world of their faith. This has been done because it has been generally recognized that our faith is founded upon an objective

revelation which God has given us of himself in Scripture. But while the 
creeds of Protestantism declare the Bible to be the supreme rule of faith,
they are not in themselves held to be infallible. They may serve as the 
highest human authority for their subscribers, but still they are not divine 
utterances and may not be treated as such. Neither are our Protestant 
creeds as ecumenical in quality as were the ancient creeds of Athanasius 
and Nicea. The use of our Protestant creeds has been restricted to larger 
or smaller denominations, and as a result they have been more or less 
provincial. While the great fundamental issues have been generally 
agreed upon by Protestants, the creeds show differences in form and con-
struction, differences in prominence given to specific elements. And while 
these symbols show a substantial unanimity in their foundation upon the 
ancient creeds in fundamental matters of theology, we may find them at 
variance in some of the peripheral points of doctrine.

Hence we feel that, on the one hand, the essential unity of belief 
expressed by the various Protestant creeds is of great significance in point-
ing to the essential oneness of all believers in Christ, and to the possibility 
of an eventual visible unity as well as a spiritual one. On the other hand, 
the differences which do exist are not to be discounted; nor can we merely 
pretend they are not there. The fact that such differences exist points to 
the fact that no creed is infallible; that at its best any creed is still a state-
ment of what fallible members of a fallible church militant have under-
stood God’s self-revelation through his Word to mean. Hence we believe 
it is possible that by a comparison of some of these creeds we may be able 
to arrive at a higher and a purer truth than any one of them contains 
individually; always remembering, however, that our comparison of them 
is subject to the same limitations encountered by those who were respon-
sible for their original formulation.

The three confessions of faith under consideration in this article are 
among those that have gone the farthest in symbolizing and shaping 
Protestant Christian thought. The Augsburg Confession is the oldest 
Protestant creed that is still in wide use today, and serves as the unifying 
symbol of the Lutheran Churches. The Heidelberg Catechism has long 
been one of the statements of Reformed faith, especially for communions 
on the European continent and in America. The Westminster Confession, 
framed originally by English Puritans, was accepted by the Scotch Presby-
terian Church and thence by churches in other lands which, while Re-
formed in doctrine, live under the name of Presbyterian. Our purpose is 
first of all to give a little of the historical background which we feel is 
necessary for a proper understanding of the differences among these con-
fessions. Next we shall compare the confessions as far as their forms and 
then their actual contents are concerned. Finally we shall discuss the three 
confessions in regard to their spirit and character.
A Look at the Historical Backgrounds

On June 25, 1530, the city of Augsburg was the scene of an epochal event in the course of the Protestant Reformation and in the history of the Christian Church as a whole. Emperor Charles V had commanded the German princes to submit a statement of their newly found faith, with the hope that Roman Catholics and Protestants might be reunited against the marauding Turks. To comply with this demand, Philip Melancthon prepared a statement which could serve both as a confession of faith and as a list of acknowledged Lutheran differences from the Roman Catholic faith with supporting reasons. Luther read the statement and gave it his full approval; in fact it may be said that Luther was the primary author of the contents of the Confession, with the more gentle Melancthon serving as the determiner of its style and temperament. Luther's only criticism was that he felt the Confession to be too gentle, and that it did not vehemently enough denounce the Pope. Thus it was that this statement, having been signed by the Protestant princes in Germany, was read before the German Emperor at the Diet of Augsburg. Although it was considerably more moderate than the Papists had expected, the statement made it clear that the cleavage between Protestant and Roman Catholic was far too sharp to be reconciled, at least at that time. A refutation to the Confession was prepared by Romish theologians, which Melancthon, in turn, answered with his Apology. This the Diet refused to receive, however, and decided to proceed with violent measures against the Protestants. Thus the initial purpose of the statement appeared to have failed. But at the same time a much larger and broader cause was being served. For it was high time for the evangelical faith to be openly confessed and formulated in order that it might be plainly set before the world. It was this immediate need which was very remarkably filled by the Augsburg Confession.²

It was sixteen years later that the Reformation was brought to the Palatinate by its pious elector, Frederick III. But Frederick had been offended by the anathemas of Lutheran zealots, and was in various ways dissatisfied with Lutheranism. He hoped, therefore, that he might be able to swing his territories from the Lutheran to the Reformed faith. In order to proceed with this purpose, Frederick commissioned two professors in the University of Heidelberg to draw up a new order for the churches. As a result, in 1563 these two professors, Ursinus and Olevianus, aided by common efforts of the entire theological faculty, produced what has since been known as the Heidelberg Catechism. Unlike the Augsburg Confession, however, it was not directly aimed at the Romish faith, nor was it polemic in its purpose although references to the Mass and other Romish practices occur notwithstanding. But the Heidelberg Catechism was drawn up primarily for teaching purposes, so that the good people of the Palatinate

tinate might be instructed in the Reformed faith. Thus, while the Augsburg Confession is certainly not bitter in spirit, the Heidelberg Catechism is even considerably more ironic, endeavoring to teach rather than to defend. The catechism was attacked by many theologians, but it was adopted by congregations in the Netherlands, and eventually by the churches in Hungary, Poland and Germany.\(^3\) From this point on it won its place as one of the historic symbols of the Reformed Faith.

About the same time that Frederick III was using the Heidelberg Catechism to swing the Palatinate to the Reformed faith, the same faith was making its first inroads into England. Protestants who had sought refuge abroad during the persecution under "Bloody Mary" had become good Calvinists and were returning with their desire for a simpler and purer form of church order. It was not until eighty years later, however, that these Puritans got their opportunity to establish their Presbyterian faith. The Scotch were largely Presbyterian, and found strong supporters in the English House of Commons. When, therefore, Charles I tried to force Anglicanism upon Scotland, he had a rebellion on his hands. The "Long Parliament" under Oliver Cromwell, which was responsible for the execution of Charles I, called together the Westminster Assembly in 1643 in order that a uniform ecclesiastical system might be framed for England, Ireland and Scotland. Since the great bulk of the delegates were Presbyterians, their sympathies naturally lay along Calvinistic lines. Parliament instructed the Assembly to prepare a confession of faith for the Church of England. This it undertook by revising the Thirty-Nine Articles, which the Puritans felt were basically sound but should be made more explicitly Calvinistic.\(^4\) The Assembly undertook the project by discussion in committees and sub-committees, and after two years and three months of deliberation the historic Westminster Confession of Faith was finally issued. The first edition suffered criticism by the House of Commons, and a second edition in May, 1647, became the authorized text.

Thus it is evident on the one hand that the Heidelberg Catechism represents a considerably more studied piece of work than the Augsburg Confession, being prepared as it was under the supervision of the entire theological faculty of Heidelberg, and for the peaceful purpose of instruction rather than for defense against Catholicism. But at the same time, both of these confessions were prepared to meet a pressing demand, to cope with an immediate critical situation. The divines of Westminster, on the other hand, were under no such pressure. Protestantism was older and more mature. Neither the flame of polemic passion nor the need to prepare lessons for an immediate pedagogical situation had to affect the Westmin-


ster theologians as they set to their task. They had at their disposal over one hundred years of Protestant life and thought, the compilation of all the light which the leaders of the Reformation had thrown upon the Scriptures as the final authority for Christian faith and practice. They were free to take this accumulated wisdom and mold it into a statement of faith which, for systematic and logical arrangement, has never been surpassed.

A COMPARISON OF FORM AND SYSTEM

As one looks at these three creeds from an objective point of view, it immediately becomes apparent that the differences in form among them are much greater than the differences in Christian doctrine. In the first place, insofar as they do not differ from Roman Catholic dogma, neither do they differ from each other. As has been noted previously, their theology is firmly rooted in the decisions of Nicea and Chalcedon, especially in regard to the doctrines of the Trinity and the person and natures of Christ. And also in the issues of dissension from the Roman Catholic faith, the three creeds are remarkably united in viewpoint considering the divergent situations out of which they arose. On all the great principles of redemption they are manifestly united: the sovereignty of God, the vicarious atonement of Christ, and justification by faith alone. All three creeds are truly evangelical in spirit; all three lead directly to Christ as the only Saviour, and to the Word of God as the only infallible rule for faith and practice.

Thus if we are to find important differences among these creeds we shall have to look first to the outward form, and then to the degrees of emphasis upon the doctrines set forth, rather than to the doctrines themselves. As we shall see later, only in the matter of the sacraments may we expect to find important points of divergence between the Augsburg Confession on the one hand, and the two Calvinistic confessions on the other.

Arising as it did out of the inception of the Reformation, we might naturally expect the Augsburg Confession to show the most direct reaction to Roman Catholicism. Although it is remarkably lenient in its reaction, the form of the Confession shows that it is built upon an effort to show that Luther's reforms were not a defection from the true Church of Christ or even from the Roman Catholic Church as it was anciently conceived. It is divided into two parts. The first part consists of twenty-one articles which enumerate the great cardinal doctrines of Luther's Reformation faith. Although these are set forth not in an antagonistic fashion, they are at the same time expressed positively and dogmatically. Thereupon follows the second part of the Confession which comprises seven articles. These seven articles, although fewer in number, occupy well over half the entire
length of the Confession. It is in these articles that some of the most outstanding abuses of Rome are discussed and rejected. Throughout an attempt is made to demonstrate that these abuses represent a departure from the early Christian Church, that the Church Fathers support the beliefs of the new Lutheran faith, and that it is Rome rather than Luther which has departed from the original Christian faith and practice. The Augsburg Confession, therefore, is organized so as to show first of all the basic conformity of the Lutherans to Apostolic Church doctrine and the broad areas of remaining agreement with the Roman Church; and secondly it points out in great detail a few of the fundamental issues at which Luther stood at variance with Rome.

Designed for teaching rather than for a polemic situation, the Heidelberg Catechism takes a form quite different from that of the Augsburg Confession. The very name tells us that it is set up in the form of a series of questions and answers designed for study and memorization. These number 129, and are divided into fifty-two Lord’s Days so that their study may be covered in one year’s time. But instead of following the deductive order of beginning with the most universal doctrines and proceeding to the more detailed and particular, as do both the Augsburg and Westminster Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism follows the order of one’s progress in Christian living, essentially as it is unfolded by Paul in Romans. Repentance, faith, and love might be called the keynotes of the three major divisions of the Catechism. The first part is a discussion of man’s misery, designed to make the catechumen aware of his sinful condition before God and his deserving of eternal punishment. In the second section we find discussed at much greater length the means of man’s redemption from sin, including material based on the Apostles’ Creed, and concluding with questions and answers on the sacraments. In the third and final section, gratitude for our salvation is set forth as the motivating force behind Christian living. Here in its proper place we find the Decalogue explained, and also the Lord’s Prayer as the model for our expression of thankfulness through prayer.

If the Heidelberg Catechism could be called the confession of practical Christian living, the Westminster Confession would be called the confession of systematic theology. For the Westminster Confession shows neither the warm apologetic character of Augsburg, nor the extremely subjective experiential viewpoint of Heidelberg. Rather, from its form and outline we may immediately see that the divines of Westminster were interested in preparing a logical, objective statement of the tenets of their faith, a statement which was to be presented not to any one particular group of people for any single purpose, but rather to whoever in the world at large might be concerned. The Confession begins with a definition of the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice, and presents reasons for the neces-
sity of accepting God's special revelation of himself through his Word. Thereupon follow in logical order discussions of God, his counsel and providence; man's fall into sin and redemption through Christ; the *ordo salutis* of effectual calling, justification, adoption, and sanctification; the Law of God versus Christian liberty; matters pertaining to church and state; and the sacraments. Two chapters on life after death and the final judgment conclude the original form of the Confession, although two more chapters on the work of the Holy Spirit and on motivation for missions have been appended in recent years. Thus, beginning with the Bible as the source of all Christian doctrine and ending with a discussion of eschatology, it is evident that of the three confessions under consideration, the Westminster Confession is the most thorough and systematic in its presentation of basic Christian dogma.

We believe the differences in form and order of these confessions to be in themselves significant. For as we have seen, they reflect not only the various historical situations out of which the symbols sprang. In addition we are helped to understand the purposes for which they were written, and the reasons why they have been held in high esteem by the Protestant bodies which have claimed them as their symbols of faith down through the centuries.

**A Discussion of Doctrinal Content**

Turning now to the issues of theological viewpoint which are expressed in these three confessions of faith, we come to the factors of primary interest in determining the extent to which they may differ from one another. For in the content of the creeds which men compose we may find their interpretation of God's revelation of himself to men in general and to themselves in particular. It may be said without fear of equivocation that in the great fundamental doctrines of the Christian Church, these three confessions of faith are at one. Although degrees of emphasis and manner of expression may differ widely, those tenets of faith which make the difference between a Christian believer and an unbeliever are held with unessential differences by all three. All are based firmly upon the ancient confessions: the Apostles' Creed, and the creeds of Athanasius, Nicea and Chalcedon. All are rooted in the Scriptural account of God's self-revelation. All agree in a theistic conception of a sovereign, triune God. They all accept Christ's atoning death as man's only deliverance from sin; and all agree that this salvation can be appropriated by faith alone. That good works must follow, not as a means to salvation but as a necessary result of faith and gratitude for salvation is held by all alike. A thoroughly evangelical spirit thus pervades all three of these confessions under study.
Searching then for differences in doctrine, we can expect to find them only in peripheral matters and in degrees of emphasis. While, as we have noted, all three confessions agree in the sovereignty of God, this is one matter where there is considerable difference in emphasis. The Augsburg Confession, in the article on Free Will, condemns Pelagianism over against Augustinianism and states that while man has liberty to choose civil righteousness, he has no power to attain to the righteousness of God, which alone can be wrought by the Holy Spirit. As for the Heidelberg Catechism, while it sprang out of the Reformed faith, it is remarkably restrained in its statement of this cardinal doctrine of Calvinism. The Westminster Confession, on the other hand, goes much farther than either Augsburg or Heidelberg. Here, in chapters three, four and five, a strong statement of God’s sovereign decree is set forth with its implications for man’s redemption. It forms the very foundation principle upon which the rest of the confession is built. God has predestined some unto everlasting life, and others he has chosen to “pass by” and has allowed them to remain in their sins. At the same time Westminster recognizes man’s freedom of will, and stoutly exempts God from being the author of sin. This mystery the Confession does not attempt to resolve; rather it simply recognizes both sides, acknowledging them as a part of God’s revelation.

Another example of a doctrine given much greater prominence in the Westminster Confession than in either of the other two symbols is the matter of Sabbath observance. Augsburg omits this entirely, and Heidelberg tells us simply “that I, (must) especially on the day of rest, diligently attend church, to learn the Word of God, to use the holy Sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian alms.” Westminster, however, developing this in much greater detail, describes the fourth commandment as a divine law of nature which is binding upon all men as a positive moral law. This was symbolical endorsement of the Puritan theory of the Christian Sabbath which led to a strict observance of the Lord’s Day. For here we find that the Sabbath is kept holy only when men “do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words and thoughts, about their worldly employments and recreation; but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

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8The Augsburg Confession (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House) Art. 18.
9The Westminster Confession, published under title of The Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Philadelphia: Publication Division of the Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1939) Ch. 3, Sec. 7.
10Ibid., Ch. 5, Sec. 4.
13The Westminster Confession, Ch. 21, Sec. 8.
But it is in the matters pertaining to the sacraments that we find the greatest differences, not only in emphasis but also in basic content, among these three confessions. Of the three, the Augsburg Confession places the greatest stress upon sacramentalism and its place within the Church’s authority. This is to be expected in the symbol of the earliest group to depart from the Roman Catholic Church. For one thing, private confession of sins is to be retained in the churches along with absolution which is to be imparted by the Church. Baptism is given a much more prominent role in the Augsburg Confession than in the others. Its place as an essential condition to salvation is stated explicitly: "Of Baptism they teach that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God; and that children are to be baptized, who, being offered to God through Baptism, are received into God’s grace." In Heidelberg, it is in Baptism that our participation in Christ’s death is “sealed and signified” but nowhere is it mentioned as an element necessary to salvation. And Westminster makes its position still more explicit: "Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated." Here we have one of the most explicitly stated differences between the Augsburg Confession and the two Reformed Confessions.

As we might expect, the articles in these confessions pertaining to the Lord’s Supper are also those in which we find a great difference between Augsburg on the one hand, and Heidelberg and Westminster on the other. Augsburg states its position of the Real Presence of Christ’s body simply and forthrightly: "Of the Supper of the Lord they teach that the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present, and are distributed to those who eat in the Supper of the Lord; and they reject those that teach otherwise." The Heidelberg Catechism, on the other hand, declares its opposition to the Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ’s body when it states that in partaking of the body and blood of Christ we are united to his body by the Holy Ghost; that Christ nevertheless is in heaven and we on the earth; also that “according to his human nature, he is not now upon earth; but according to his Godhead, majesty, grace and spirit, he is at no time absent from us.” Heidelberg further speaks of the bread and cup of the Lord as being “certain tokens of the body and blood of Christ.” Likewise Westminster even more clearly rejects both transub-

11 The Augsburg Confession, Art. 11 and 12.
12 Ibid., Art. 9.
13 The Heidelberg Catechism, Ques. 69.
14 The Westminster Confession, Ch. 23, Sec. 5.
15 The Augsburg Confession, Art. 10.
16 The Heidelberg Catechism, Ques. 76.
17 Ibid., Ques. 47.
18 Ibid., Ques. 75.
stantiation and consubstantiation, stating that "the outward elements in his Sacrament — in substance and nature — still remain truly, and only (italics mine), bread and wine, as they were before."\textsuperscript{19} Although Augsburg still retains the word Mass for the Lord's Supper, it is robbed of its Romish significance when the ideas, that Christ instituted the Mass as an offering for daily sins, and that the Mass takes away the sins of the living and the dead by the outward act, are repudiated.\textsuperscript{20} The glory of Christ must not be diminished by saying that his death satisfied for original guilt only, but not for other sins. That justification comes by faith alone rather than by the work of the Masses is as much a part of the Augsburg Confession as it is of the Reformed confessions.

As we have noted, the Augsburg Confession is far more explicit in its delineation of its differences from the Roman faith than are the two later creeds. Even in the first section of the document, in which the positive tenets of faith are affirmed, references to distinction from Romish dogma and practice are clear. In the twenty-first article, the last in this section, the worship of saints is repudiated; Christ alone is Mediator. In articles twenty-two through twenty-nine, where Romish abuses are especially condemned, other matters such as the granting of both elements to the laity in the eucharist, the marriage of priests, condemnation of compulsory monastic vows, and denial of the Church's right to interfere in civil affairs are discussed at considerable length. In the Heidelberg Catechism and Westminster Confession, the references to Roman Catholic practices are more infrequent and indirect. Their most explicit denunciation of Romanism is in their condemnation of the Popish Mass as being efficacious in obtaining forgiveness of sins.

CONSIDERATIONS PERTAINING TO STYLE AND CHARACTER

There are several other considerations which do not exactly fall under the previously discussed subjects, and these we shall now consider. The fact that the Augsburg Confession was the first important Protestant creed to achieve wide acceptance provides it both with advantages and disadvantages. Needless to say, it met with considerable opposition on the part of the Calvinistic reformers. Probably all the objections of the Reformed leaders were comprehended by Ursinus in the Newstadt Admonition of the Book of Concord when he writes: "No particular church has the right to impose a formula on other particular churches; it was written too soon after the break with Rome; but a few theologians were concerned in it; it was made in haste and great agitation; it was presented in trembling, and after being shaped with all timidity by men who felt that their

\textsuperscript{19}\textit{The Westminster Confession}, Ch. 29, Sec. 5.
\textsuperscript{20}\textit{The Augsburg Confession}, Art. 24.
heads were not safe on their shoulders; the editions differ; there are things in the Confession which even its friends cannot defend; Transubstantiation for example, the Mass, Absolution as a Sacrament, and prayers for the dead."\(^\text{21}\) Nevertheless, in spite of this devastating attack on the part of the author of the Heidelberg Catechism, we today cannot but laud the earnest and devout evangelical spirit which pervades the entire work, a spirit which rings with the unaffected candor of new, vibrant, evangelical believers. Of the three confessions, this is the only one designed specifically as a defense of Protestant faith against Roman Catholicism, but as such it is clearly a defense rather than an attack. The language is mild and dignified, with an absence of harsh or abusive terms. An earnest effort is made to demonstrate itself in harmony with the genuine tradition of the ancient Roman Church. While the important issues of variance with Catholicism are not compromised, there is throughout a plea for peace, and an evident hope that a reconciliation with the Pope may be effected.\(^\text{22}\)

While the Augsburg Confession is remarkably moderate in its tones, it nevertheless carries the unmistakable marks of a polemic. The Heidelberg Catechism, on the other hand, has little or none of this. Frederick III of the Palatinate was interested first of all in providing some sort of a text for the people of his territory whereby they might more easily learn the fundamentals of the Reformed evangelical faith from the viewpoint of the Christian believer's experience. The writers of the Catechism therefore produced a work which is entirely free of polemic zeal and intolerance, and yet which is fresh, lively and clear. The Heidelberg Catechism presents the Christian faith not as a commanding law, an intellectual scheme or a system of outward observances; but rather in the true evangelical sense of a practical, cheerful source of peace and comfort. The first question and answer have been universally loved and admired for the way in which they catch up the central idea of the Christian faith. Several other questions and answers are both literary and spiritual gems, notably the definition of true faith in question twenty-one. Henry Bullinger, writing to a friend, said of the Heidelberg Catechism: "The order of the book is clear; the matter true, good and beautiful; the whole is luminous, fruitful, and godly; it comprehends many and great truths in a small compass. I believe that no better catechism has ever been issued."\(^\text{23}\) The difficult matters surrounding the Calvinistic conception of the sovereignty of God are set forth in wise moderation. Election to holiness is explained as a source of humility, gratitude and comfort. There is no mention of the more harsh aspects of Calvinism such as double predestination or limited atonement, which in itself is remarkable inasmuch as the authors were

strict predestinarians. Such debatable issues, however, are left to private
opinion and theological science. Throughout the catechism the language
used is profound yet simple, deep yet clear, doctrinal yet with a living
theology, a strange union of opposites.24

Both the Augsburg Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism arose
within the first fifty years of the Reformation, and carry the fervency of
a still-glowing heart. By the next century this initial fervor had already
been somewhat modified by a form of Protestant Scholasticism. The West­
minster Confession of this century, therefore, must rather be considered a
product of the devout intellect. Rather than beginning from concepts of
God's love and mercy, as does the Heidelberg Catechism, Westminster
starts from the position of God's sovereignty and justice, and reasons ab­
stractly through its doctrine of God's eternal decrees instead of interpreting
them Christologically. It makes an extremely logical deduction from the
document of election to the damnation of non-elect infants and the entire
heathen world.25 This excessive stress on the Divine Decree which seems
to appear wherever it has a chance, plus the little room allowed for any
mystical element or play of emotion, reflect the hard severity of the Purit­
tans who framed the Confession. The excellences of the Westminster Con­
fession are however not to be minimized. It is the fullest, most complete
statement of the Calvinistic system among the Protestant symbols, and as
such it is still vital today. The clearness and precision of the language
have aided greatly in shaping theological thought in the English language.
The style is clear, strong and dignified. It may be said that of the three
confessions under consideration, the Westminster Confession, while per­
haps not the most fresh or elastic, is nevertheless the most carefully and
logically developed statement of the Christian faith.

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In conclusion, therefore, we must say that these three confessions,
symbolic of the Reformation faith, are much more similar than they are
different as far as the matters of vital importance are concerned. Except
for those matters pertaining to the sacraments, as we have noted, the dif­
fences among these confessions result primarily out of the particular
circumstances out of which they arose. But common to all of these creeds
is the great evangelical faith, the pronouncement of justification by faith
alone, which was the genius of the Protestant Reformation. For this reason
they have lived through the years, and are vital yet today. Separately con­
sidered, these three confessions have served as unifying standards of faith
for the great evangelical communions by which they have been adopted.
Considered together, they teach us how trivial are the issues which divide

Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States,
1914) p. 289.

25*The Westminster Confession, Ch. 10, Sec. 3.*
Christians, and how vast are the areas of common faith. They challenge us to join our hearts in fellowship with our brothers in Christ, and present to the world a common witness to the grace of our Saviour.