

# Introduction

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland has asked the Theological Forum to look again at our Church's confession, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which is called the 'Principal Subordinate Standard' of the Church. This means that it is a summary of what the Church believes. Ministers and Elders are required to affirm the Confession at ordinations and inductions. As evangelicals within the Church, it is important that we understand the significance of the Confession and contribute to the discussions about its status.

## The Westminster Assembly

It is not possible to understand the *Westminster Confession of Faith* without knowing something of the historical background.

The English Reformation began with Henry VIII. It was carried a little further by Edward VI. Unfortunately, he died young and Mary came to the throne. She rejected the Reformation, turned everything back to the Roman Catholic way and persecuted the Reformers.

During Mary's reign many protestants fled from England to Europe. There they found themselves in Reformed churches, like in Geneva or Zurich. When Mary died and the Protestant queen Elizabeth I took over, many of these protestants returned, hoping for a Reformation in England like the one they had seen in Europe. They were disappointed, believing that Elizabeth had not gone far enough. They were called Puritans, because they felt that the Church of England needed to be purified of much of the old Roman Catholic ways and a full Reformation established.

Later, during the Civil War between Charles I and Parliament, the Puritans came to the fore and had much influence, especially over Oliver Cromwell. The Westminster Assembly was set up by the Parliament 'to establish uniformity' in theology and church government in England, Scotland and Ireland. The Westminster Assembly was set up by parliament, not the churches and was effectively an advisory body to the parliament.

## Members of the Assembly

The Westminster Assembly met from 1st July 1643 until 22nd February 1649. It consisted of 121 ministers plus 10 from the House of Lords and 20 from the House of Commons, all of whom were full members of the Assembly.

The Church of Scotland also sent representatives: 4 ministers and 2 elders. These men, because of their stature and theological ability, played a part in the Assembly out of proportion to their numbers but they did not have voting rights. This was partly because of their stature, especially Samuel Rutherford and David Dickson. Rutherford became a Professor and was a hugely influential Scottish theologian. Dickson was brought up in Glasgow where he attended the University and later became a Professor of Philosophy there after graduation. In 1618 he was ordained to the Ministry and served in Irvine where there was something of a revival under his Ministry. He later served as Professor of Divinity first in Glasgow and then in Edinburgh.

It was Dickson's *Sum of Saving Knowledge* (written with James Durham) which most helped to promote Reformed theology in Scotland, ultimately being bound up with the Confession and Catechisms for common use.

Among the other Scottish Commissioners were Alexander Henderson (1583-1646), George Gillespie (1613-1649), Robert Baillie (1599-1662) and William Guthrie (1620-1665).

The chairman of the Westminster Assembly (called the Prolocutor) was Dr Twisse. After his death this position was taken by Mr Herle. The average attendance was around 60-80 at each session although only about 20 played a significant part in the debates.

One of the earliest events in the life of the Assembly was the signing and approving of the Solemn League and Covenant. This was the document which committed the Scottish Parliament to the support of the English Parliament in its struggle against Charles I. It also enshrined the principles of the National Covenant of 1638.

The Assembly began by revising the Church of England's '39 Articles' but on 12th October, Parliament instructed the Assembly to write about worship, church government and church discipline, according to Scripture. This took until almost the end of 1644 and resulted in the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* and the *Form of Presbyterial Church Government*.

Then they turned their attention to writing a new Confession of Faith. The finished *Westminster Confession of Faith* was presented to Parliament on 3rd December 1646. Parliament sent it back, saying that they wanted Scripture references to support each statement in the Confession. This was done and the final version was presented to Parliament on 29th April 1647.

There followed the *Shorter Catechism* presented on 5th November 1647 and the *Larger Catechism* presented on 14th April 1648.

When the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was finalized, it was shortly thereafter adopted and approved by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.