

WHAT GOOD ARE THEY TODAY?

Tom Reid

Three hundred and fifty years ago the Westminster assembly of Divines met for several years and produced six major written documents: The *Confession of Faith*, two *Catechisms* (*Larger* and *Shorter*), the "*Sum of Saving Knowledge*," the *Directory for the Public Worship of God* and the "*Form of Presbyterial Church-Government*." Most Presbyterian denominations around the world make use of one or more of the first three; few bother any more with the last three – which is a pity, as they are relatively brief documents with varied subject matters displaying all the excellences of the more famous Confession and Catechisms. But what good are the Westminster documents [Standards] to us living at the end of the second millennium since Jesus Christ?

1. They serve as a *summary* of what we should believe and how we should live. The 1600 pages of my Bible are summarised in the few-score pages of each document (fewer still if you leave out the proof texts!). There are dangers in such an endeavour, to be sure – that something of importance might be left out, or something of little importance exaggerated or, worst of all, that something stated is not biblical. Such brevity is healthy! Our information-rich society covets brevity over verbosity. Witness the popularity of the *USA Today* newspaper, political "sound bytes," and the countless newsletters produced to summarise the more substantive press. The Westminster documents help us by briefly and clearly stating what the Bible teaches.

2. The Westminster documents provide a *standard* by which to judge what is consistent with God's Word and what is not. They were the final confessional production of the Reformation churches. Thus they are built on the materials produced in earlier generations during that age of such keen theological insight. And they were formulated during the covenanting period, when faithfulness to God's Word was perhaps higher than ever, before or since, in human history. No wonder, then, that candidates for office in the church are examined in relation to their faithfulness to these documents, and candidates for membership in the church

are expected to indicate that they will abide by them. New – or apparently new – ideas are tested against the wisdom that has come down to us from the past. We are not the first people to experience the Spirit of God's illumination of the text of Scripture.

The Westminster documents also serve as a standard around which the people of God can rally. Watch carefully the disintegration of the so-called "mainline" churches; their belief in pluralism serves as a powerful centrifugal force driving them apart. Raise up a standard and the faithful rally to it!

3. The Westminster documents are a *service* to the world. They expose the sin of the world and the compromise of the church, and they set out the way of salvation. They call the governments of the world to bow in humble submission to the mediatorial kingship of Jesus Christ. They set out God's way in belief, worship, discipline and government for the church. They guide the family in structuring itself, learning to function effectively and determining the role of its members.

A few years ago, an elder in a small-town Presbyterian congregation gave a copy of the Westminster Shorter Catechism to a young father in his community from a Mennonite church. After perusing it, the delighted man reported to the elder, "This is just what we need to teach our young people!" No wonder, for when we pay attention to the contents of the Westminster documents, we are confronted with the very truth of God!

LONDON HALF-DAY CONVENTION

Saturday September 17th 1994

in ORANGE STREET CHAPEL

(near Trafalgar Square, behind National Gallery)

Speaker

Rev Ronald Hanko (*Ballymena*)

Subjects

3.00 pm "MARKS OF GOD'S GRACE IN THE
LIVES OF TRUE BELIEVERS"

6.00 pm "THE REFORMED VIEW OF PRAYER"

All members and friends welcome

Bring own refreshments – cups of tea provided