THE CONFESSION

of the

ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A STUDY COMMENTARY ON THE
WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

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The Confession of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church:
A Study Commentary on the Westminster Standards
© 2012-2017, Jeremiah W. Montgomery

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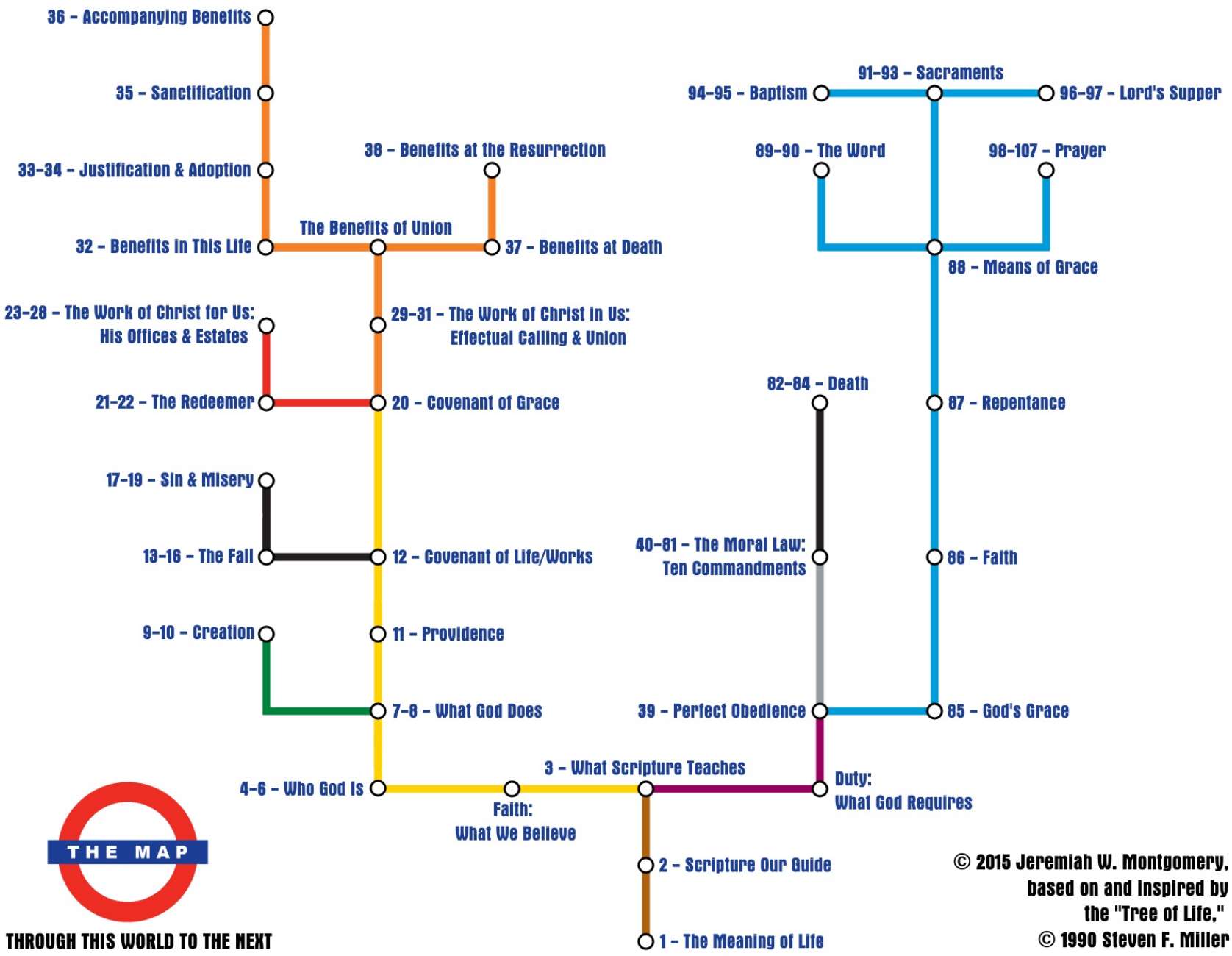

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SESSION 1:
The Map

Readings
Montgomery, "The Map"

Introduction

The goal of these sessions will be to familiarize ourselves with the doctrines of the Bible as summarized in the confessional standards of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC): the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF), *Larger Catechism* (WLC), and *Shorter Catechism* (WSC). These standards are not above the Bible, but they form a time-tested lens by which the OPC reads and interprets the Bible. Every officer in the OPC much subscribe to these standards at the time of ordination.

In this first session, we are going to discuss the *legitimacy* of confessional theology, how our confessions show us the *logic* of biblical theology, and how they serve as our *lens* – helping us to connect the dots in God's story.

The Legitimacy of Confessional Theology

The first question we should ask ourselves is, "Is it legitimate for Christians, committed to the supreme authority of Scripture, to use written confessions of faith?" This question can be divided into two sub-questions: 1) does God *permit* it? and, 2) does God *encourage* it? Both questions can be answered from the text of Scripture itself.

Does God permit his people to make use of written confessions of faith? Consider the following passages from Scripture:[1]

> And you shall make response before the LORD your God, "A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me." And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 26.5-10)

> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15.3-8)

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing minister of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

> The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Timothy 1.15)
>
> Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1 Timothy 3.16)

None of the above passages replace the more extensive Scriptures they reflect – and yet they do clearly demonstrate the permissibility of summarizing Scripture.

Yet perhaps we are not yet convinced. After all, we might remind ourselves that we are not apostles – and therefore the summaries we write are not protected by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Fair enough. So the question may remain: does Scripture anywhere encourage us to use our own summaries of biblical teaching? To answer this question, let us consider the following passage:

> Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12.6-8)

Of particular importance in the section of verse 6 that speaks of the exercise of prophecy. Most major English translations render it similarly, using the phrase "in proportion…" But the Greek says: "*kata tēn analogian tēs pisteōs*" – literally, "according to the analogy of the faith." In an extended but important passage, theologian John Stott explains the significance of this phrase:

> The first *charisma* Paul mentions here is *prophesying*, that is, speaking under divine inspiration. In Ephesians 2:20 apostles and prophets are bracketed as the foundation on which the church is built. So that reference to foundation-prophets is likely to be to the biblical prophets, including those New Testament authors who were prophets as well as apostles, such as Paul and John. In two lists of *charismata*, however, prophets are placed in a secondary position to the apostles, suggesting that there was a lesser prophetic gift, subsidiary to that of the biblical prophets. Words spoken by such prophets were to be 'weighed' and 'tested' (1Cor. 14:29; 1Thes. 5:19-21; 1Jn. 4:1), whereas the apostles were to be believed and obeyed, and no sifting process was deemed appropriate or necessary in their case. Another diference seems to have been that prophets spoke to a local situation, whereas the authority of the apostles was universal… It is in the light of these differences that we should understand the regulation which Paul here places on the exercise of the prophetic gift… we should note that 'faith' has the definite article, and we should transate the phrase "in agreement with the faith." That is, "the prophet is to make sure that his message does not in any way contradict the Christian faith."[2]

Notice the importance of this passage. In dealing with a situation where non-apostles are teaching the Christian faith, they are to be held to an objective standard – "the analogy of the faith." In an era where the New Testament was yet to be completed, what would such a standard have been except a formalized – either orally memorized, or written – summary of the essentials of Christian truth?

[2] John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 326-327. The final quote cited by Stott is from the commentary on Romans by C.E.B. Cranfield.

Another passage to consider comes from Paul's last surviving letter:

> Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (2 Timothy 1.13-14)

Notice here, that as Paul contemplates the Timothy ministering in a post-apostolic world (cf. 2Tim 4.6), he exhorts his protégé not simply to follow the "sound words," but to "follow the *pattern* of the sound words." Does this not imply that, within the words of Scripture, there is a logical pattern?

It seems then, that we are on safe ground in amaking and using written confessions of faith, provided we follow two rules: 1) we understand our confessions of faith *not as replacements for God's Word, but as summaries of it*, and 2) we *test our confessions of faith* by the objective standards of God's Word.

The Logic of Biblical Theology

Having established the legitimacy of written confessions of faith, we should now ask an equally important question: what is their *purpose*? The answer to this question lies in a simple analogy – that of a *concordance*.

Most Christians have seen, and many even own, a concordance to the Bible. A concordance is a typically large book, listing all of the most important words in the Bible alphabetically. Then, next to the entry for each word, there is a list of all (or at least of the most important) passages of Scripture where that word is found. Especially in the days before digital search tools, a reliable concordance was considered an essential component in the library of a serious Christian.

A reliable confession of faith is nothing more – and nothing less! – than a *theological concordance*. The WCF, for example, lists thirty-three different important theological topics. For each of these topics, the confession carefully summarizes and logically arranges the teaching of the Bible on that subject. For each paragraph and most sentences, Scripture references are provided. These not only allow the serious Christian to "check the work" of the confessional theologians; they also show us where in Scripture to find God's own words on the topic in question!

Our Lens – Connecting the Dots in God's Story

As we study the doctrines of the Bible, using our written confessions as a guide, we come to see that there is a unified, logical, and beautiful shape to God's story of salvation. It is a story of our Creator, his creation, and his covenants. All of Scripture's story can be divided into twelve historical acts:

Stage	**Dates (Approx.)**	**Books**
Prologue	Creation – 2200 BC	Genesis 1-11
Patriarchs	2200 – 1805 BC	Genesis 12-50
Exodus	1446 BC	Exodus 1-19
Wilderness	1446 – 1406 BC	Exodus 20 – Deuteronomy 34
Conquest	1485 – 1375 BC	Joshua 1-24
Disintegration	1375 – 1050 BC	Judges 1 – Ruth 4
Unification	1050 – 930 BC	1Sam 1 – 1Ki 11; 1Ch 1 – 2Ch 9; Psalms – Song of Solomon
Division	930 – 586 BC	1Ki 12 – 2 Ki 25; 2Ch 10 – 36; Isaiah – Zephaniah
Exile	586 – 538 BC	Jeremiah-Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel
Post-Exile	538 – 400 BC	Ezra-Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Esther, Malachi
Fulfillment	6 BC – AD 33	Matthew – John
Finale	AD 33 – New Creation	Acts – Revelation

Yet this twelve-act *drama* can itself be understood as the outworking of *four* major epocs of human history, involving God's *two* basic covenants with humanity:

Stage	Scriptures	Covenant
Creation	Genesis 1.1-2.25	Covenant of Works
Rebellion	Genesis 3.1-13	
Rescue	Genesis 3.14 – Revelation 20.15	Covenant of Grace
Consummation	Revelation 21-22	

At this point, there may be quite a bit that is unclear. Much of it will be fleshed out in later sessions. For now, the most important thing to note is that the Christian faith revealed in the Bible has a clear structure – and that if we learn that structure, our faith and practice will be better-equipped.

Testimonial

Growing up in the OPC, the present author remembers reciting the WSC on a weekly basis during public worship. But it never seemed to be anything more than a flat list: 107 questions and answers about God, written in King James English. I followed along with the rest of the congregation, but never saw much value – and didn't take it very seriously.

It was not until I was studying for licensure as a ministry candidate that I was forced to take the WSC – along with the WCF and the WLC – seriously. But even then, the prospect was hardly exciting. Initially, I approached the study the way one would approach any body of material that must be committed to memory: with grim determination, but not with delight.

Then something happened. A minister in my presbytery, Rev. Steve Miller, sat me down and gave me a copy of a diagram he called "the Tree of Life."[3] The moment I saw this diagram, my theological life changed. For the first time ever, I saw that there was a logical structure to the theology of the Bible. From that moment on, though I knew there was still much to learn, I approached the study of doctrine with a new relish. For the Bible was no longer an obtuse *maze*; there was a clear *map* to what it revealed.

The lesson I take from this is clear: *when one has a clear map, the maze disappears and marvel awakens.* It is my hope that as we continue these studies, you will come to share my experience.

Important Questions

1. Is there any such thing as a Christian church without a creed?
2. What are the benefits of publishing written creeds? What are the dangers?

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards,* 11-15, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
1	1-5	1-3

[3]The present author's own diagram, "the Map," was adapted with permission directly from Rev. Miller's painting – the original of which remains to this day in Eritrea, where Steve served as a missionary from 1998-1999.