

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Westminster Confession of Faith Of Providence

Study by the Rev. Matthew Everhard
Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church

Hold Fast the Faith, by the Rev. Matthew Everhard, is intended to be a guide to help you work through the Westminster Confession of Faith on a transformational level, not merely an intellectual level. In other words, the goal of this book is to help you pray through the Confession in a way that fosters personal transformation and spiritual growth.

Following the content of each chapter of the Confession, I have included my own insights into how spiritual formation can begin to occur using the Confession as our measure. It is here, following the reading of each chapter, that the reader is encouraged to spend time in meditation, confession of sin and praise. These meditations and formation exercises are what set this work apart from the many other studies of the Westminster one may find in print. Five principle types of exercises will be included in each chapter, as follows:

Prepare in Prayer

The prayers under the heading “Prepare in Prayer” are just that – short, succinct prayers for the reader to offer to God as you ready your heart and submit your mind for the reading of Scripture and further study.

Reach Back

Sections marked “Reach Back” are small commentaries on the historical or theological content of the Confession. These sections will help the reader to understand the mindset of the Westminster Divines as they went about their work of articulating the Christian faith. Modern believers will be assisted in spanning the gap between the centuries by looking back to the context in which the Confession was written. As we do this, we will often find that the moral standards of the Confession’s writers raise needed critique to today’s ethical laxity.

Search Inward

Exercises labeled “Search Inward” are designed to lead the reader to look deeper into his or her own soul and reflect on one’s own life. This is often precisely the step that we avoid when we study doctrine! When reading the Westminster, we will be surprised at how often it suggests something important in regard to our own situation. Often what we read in the Confession will prompt us to ask questions of ourselves that are uncomfortable. This is good and healthy. “Search Inward” sections will often lead us to repent, give thanks, or even fall onto our faces in the holy presence of the Lord.

Gaze Upward

Sections marked “Gaze Upward” are designed to prompt the reader to burst into spontaneous praise. The Westminster Confession of Faith is an intensely God-centered document. These sections will usually point to passages in the Confession that cause us to give glory to God. Here you will certainly find specific rea-

sons to sing, declare God’s greatness, or stand in awed silence before His holiness. So often we find ourselves encumbered by the sheer weightiness of doctrine, that we fail to allow its power to call us into the assembly of angels, martyrs and saints to exalt His name in praise.

Step Out

Sections called “Step Out” are designed to move the reader to action. It should never be the case that Christian teaching prompts our minds to move, but not our lives. Christian instruction must always be connected to responsive action. No reading of the Confession – or Scripture for that matter – should leave us the same as we were before. Each time we encounter God through the Scriptures, and many times that we encounter Him in the Confession, we are changed and called to receive our life-mission.

One Final Challenge

My challenge to the reader is to “eat” this book in small sections, digesting each chapter of the Westminster in bite-sized portions. As a matter of course, one chapter of the Confession followed by its spiritual formation section will likely be enough for one sitting. Any more, and the mind may be overrun with too many thoughts! In any case, the suggested spiritual formation exercises, if honestly attempted, will lead the believer in such a direction of prayer as will be spiritually edifying to the soul.

Please remember that even though the Westminster Confession has literally dozens of quotations of Scripture within, and allusions to many more, it is no substitute for reading Scripture itself. While the Scriptures are the words of God, the Confession is nonetheless the words of men.

For this reason, each section will be fortified by special readings of Scripture that are designed to parallel the segment of the Confession.

The Confession itself acknowledges its human limitations (WCF 1.10). At the same time, it has served as an inspiration to countless souls, and it is my conviction that it will benefit you too “until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19).



The March/April equipping study is based on *Hold Fast the Faith*, written by the Rev. Matthew Everhard and published by PLC Publications. The book can be purchased through The Layman Online (www.layman.org/bookstore2) or through Amazon.com.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Confession Chapter Five: Of Providence

1. *God, the great Creator of all things, does uphold, direct, dispose and govern all creatures, actions and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness and mercy.*
2. *Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet, by the same providence, He orders them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.*
3. *God, in His ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above and against them, at His pleasure.*
4. *The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extends itself even to the first Fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God; who being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.*
5. *The most wise, righteous and gracious God does oftentimes leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for various other just and holy ends.*
6. *As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous judge, for former sins, does blind and harden; from them He not only withholds His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon their hearts; but sometimes also withdrawals the gifts which they had; and exposes them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin; and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan; whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God uses for the softening of others.*
7. *As the providence of God does, in general, reach to all creatures, so, after a most special manner, it takes care of His Church, and disposes all things to the good thereof.*

Into the Scriptures
Read Job 1-3
and Romans 1.

Prepare in Prayer:

Mighty God, as we read, think and study today, please remind us that without Your providence, having ordered all the events in the past that preceded our lives, we would not have even been born. For this, we give You praise. Amen.

If you have enjoyed this equipping study
consider purchasing *Hold Fast the Faith*
by calling 800-368-0110
or by visiting www.layman.org or Amazon.com

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week One: Reach Back

What do we really mean when we say things like “God is in control” and “It’s in God’s hands?” We often use words like these when a friend is looking for a job, or a single person is anxious to find a spouse, or a child becomes sick. And yet in what ways is God really in control of our lives?

Theologian Wayne Grudem writes that the providence of God means,

“God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that He 1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; 2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and 3) directs them to fulfill His purposes.”¹

Once again in this reading from the Confession, we find that the Divines are pushing the doctrine of the sovereignty of God to its full extension. Here, the writers credit God with being the active Lord over all creation. He is no passive landowner. The Divines are quick to point out that God is not only the giver of divine blessings, but also the withholder of blessings both to test the righteous, and to mete out judgment on the unrighteous (WCF 5.5,6). Admittedly, it is hard to swallow the idea that God would allow His children to suffer, but suffering is never without a perfect purpose (see Philippians 3:10).

Thomas a’Kempis writes, “Prepare yourself to endure many adversities and various kinds of trouble in this difficult life, for that is the way it will be with you wherever you are, and you will find it that way no matter where you hide yourself.”² Each and every one of us will suffer in this life. The difference is to whom or what we cling when the suffering comes.

For reflection:

1. What do you really mean when you say “God is in control” or “It’s in God’s hands?”
2. In what ways is God really in control of your life?
3. How do you prepare yourself “to endure many adversities and various kinds of trouble” in life?
4. To whom do you cling when suffering comes?

¹ Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1994) p. 315.

² Thomas a’Kempis. *The Imitation of Christ*. (North Brunswick NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1999) p. 102.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week Two: Search Inward

The confession is very clear, as is Scripture, that God permits evil to exist for a time, but that He is never the first cause of evil (WCF 5.4). He is not the author of evil and does no malevolence, for this would be contrary to His holy nature. “Let no one say when he is tempted,” writes James, “‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one” (1:13). Do you ever mistakenly blame God or despise Him in your heart for the results of your own sin, the sin of another person, or even the fallen nature of creation itself? Ask God to give your heart a proper balance for understanding that He is in control of all things, and yet does no evil of His own accord.

More than that, does your heart give praise to God for the wonderful things that He does which appear at the time to be difficulties? Often what we perceive as a hindrance is actually God working on our behalf.

For instance, several years ago my son Elijah went to the doctor for a routine check-up. He had had a severe cough and chest cold. After listening to the lungs, our family doctor called for a chest x-ray. To the doctor’s astonishment and ours, a large cyst was discovered in his left, top lung. Though my wife and I wept at the thought of an object the size of a jumbo egg being lodged in our 3-year-old’s lung, we couldn’t help but praise God that the discovery was made. After all, had Elijah not contracted the cold, we would have never known that this cyst was growing inside of him. Having been discovered, the cyst was removed by the careful hand of the surgeon before it caused more problems later in life. After our initial grief, Kelly and I attributed this discovery to God as a serendipity. The providence of God is marvelous, although it is often mysterious.

For reflection:

1. Have you ever mistakenly blamed God for the results of your own sin? Have you asked for forgiveness?
2. Discuss a time when you have praised God for the wonderful things that He has done which appeared at the time to be difficulties.
3. How has the providence of God seemed marvelous and mysterious to you?

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week Three: Gaze Upward

So many times, in our childish conceptions of God, we are willing to only credit God for His interventions into human history and our own lives when God brings about pleasurable things. Yet the Scriptures contain a much fuller picture of the sovereignty of God. As the account of Job reveals, God often removes His hand of comfort, even from believers, so that the fullness of their dependence may be revealed in times of duress. And yet, we learn from Job's experience, that Satan's power is severely restricted to the permission of God (Job 1:12, 2:6). The evil one may not even blink without God's permission.

Thus, the Divines hope to point out in the confession that temptation, illness, disease and other secondary causes (or "means," WCF 5.3) are not unexpected flare-ups of evil contrary to the will of God, but are in fact, quite mysteriously, ordained in the secret counsel of God's holy and perfect will to bring about God's divine plan for human history and even our own individual lives. Often, it is these very trials that promote the glory of God in our lives as we endure them. John Piper provocatively writes:

"Suffering with Jesus on the Calvary road of love is not merely the result of magnifying Christ, it is also the means."¹

For reflection:

1. Discuss a time when God's intervention has brought about pleasurable things. Contrast those times to a period when you feel that God removed His hand of comfort from you.
2. What Scriptures helped you through times of pleasure and times of suffering?
3. How can you – unlike the friends of Job – help a friend who is suffering?
4. Make an action plan to actually reach out to a suffering person in your community.

¹ John Piper. *Don't Waste Your Life*. (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2003) p. 61.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week Four: Step Out

Rejoicing During Trial: In your prayers today, do something quite unnatural to your human inclination by praising God for the greatest struggle that you are engaged in right now. Are you or a loved one ill? Praise God that He has allowed you to suffer for a purpose. Are you struggling with a temptation? Praise God for giving you His Holy Spirit to strengthen you during that time. Are you grappling with the evils of this world such as terrorism, natural disasters, or the death of a loved one? Praise God that, though you do not understand His will, He is still in control of all things. Think back over your life and highlight the times that God has allowed you to go through serious suffering. Note the ways that God has caused you to cling more desperately to Him.

I remember a children's book that I read as a child. The clouds and the sun were having a competition to see who could more easily cause the man to take off his trench coat. The clouds attempted first. They blew and fussed, attempting to rip the coat right off of the man. They could, they supposed, get right underneath the material and tear off the outer coat. But the harder the winds blew, the more the man clung desperately to it. Shouldn't trials, temptations and times of suffering work that way too? The more ferocious the storm, the more we cling to our robes of righteousness?

Later the sun made his attempt. In quite an opposite way, the sun's tactics were subtler. He gently shined on the man's back. The man hardly knew what was happening. Soon he took off the coat and left it behind. Unfortunately he was more exposed to the sun's dangers as he began to burn. The sun had won. The man let down his guard.

If you are not in a time of hardship now, be careful here too. Often when we feel secure in our selves, perceiving that we are in no state of danger, we are prone to the pitfalls of sin, the temptations of the flesh, and subtle tendencies toward self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

Using the words of the confession, extol Him for His "almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness" no matter what type of hardship you are going through.

For reflection:

1. During trials, temptations and times of suffering, do you cling to the Son of righteousness? Make a list of Scripture verses and memorize them to help you cling to the Son.
2. How do you guard against the pitfalls of sin, the temptations of the flesh, and subtle tendencies toward self-reliance and self-sufficiency? Make a list of Scripture verses to help you.
3. Did you have an opportunity to put your Week Three plan into action? Did you reach out to a suffering person in your community? Discuss what happened.