

THE WESTMINSTER AND SAVOY CONFESSIONS:  
A BRIEF COMPARISON

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The recent reprinting of the *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*,<sup>1</sup> originally produced by the Congregational divines who met at the Savoy Palace in the early autumn of 1658, and the continuing discussion, especially in North America, concerning the exact nature of the 'Calvinism' of the famous *Westminster Confession of Faith*,<sup>2</sup> originally composed by the Assembly of divines meeting at Westminster between 1643 and 1647, perhaps give sufficient reason for a fresh comparison of the theology of the two Confessions. In particular this article will concentrate its attention upon a comparison of the doctrines of repentance, faith and the gospel in the two documents. This will also necessitate a brief look at federal theology. Further, brief notice will be made of the connection between the nature of the Church and eschatology.

In the speech delivered by Dr. Thomas Goodwin, President of Magdalen College, Oxford, on the occasion of the presentation (on 14 October 1658) to the Lord Protector, Richard Cromwell, of a copy of the recently produced *Declaration*, one major purpose of the document was clearly stated:

We [desired] in the first place to clear ourselves of that scandal, which not only some persons at home, but of foreign parts have affixed upon us, viz. That Independentism (as they call it) is the sink of all heresies and schisms. We have therefore declared what hath been our constant Faith and Order, to be published to the world. And to shew our harmony with the most orthodox at home and abroad, we have expressed our assent to that Confession of Faith which is the latest and best. . . namely, the Articles of Religion approved and passed by both Houses of Parliament after advice had with the Assembly of Divines, to which Confession for the substance of it, we have unanimously and through the grace of Christ, without the least contradiction, assented and agreed.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Published by the Evangelical Press of London. I have used the reprint of the *Declaration* in *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, ed. Williston Walker (new edition with an introduction by Douglas Horton), Philadelphia and Boston, 1960.
2. I have used the reprint issued by the Publications Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1967.
3. The speech is recorded in the news-journal *Mercurius Politicus* No. 438 published in October 1658. A. G. Matthews prints part of the speech in his introduction to the *Savoy Declaration*, London 1958. Matthews introduction is very helpful but his interpretation of the political views of John Owen in particular is probably a false one.

The *Articles of Religion* to which he referred was the shortened form of the Confession of Faith produced by the divines;<sup>4</sup> the full Confession, usually called the *Westminster Confession*, was approved by the Scottish Kirk in August 1647 and by the Estates of Parliament in February 1649.

Goodwin obviously assumed that in basic matters such as the doctrines of God's grace to man the *Declaration* was in full agreement with the *Articles of Religion*. So also did John Owen, Dean of Christ Church, and his colleagues<sup>5</sup> who drafted the *Declaration*, for in the preface, from which we learn (amongst other things) just how precarious was the legal position of the churches of the Congregational way in 1658, it is assumed that in essentials there is full agreement between the Westminster and Savoy divines. 'In drawing up this *Confession*,' they wrote, 'we have had before us the *Articles of Religion*, approved and passed by both Houses of Parliament. . . to which Confession, for the substance of it, we fully assent.'<sup>6</sup>

This statement, together with that of Goodwin, would seem to make any comparison of the doctrines of the gospel a waste of time. But we recall that within English religion there were many developments between 1647 and 1658. This was a great period for the sects—Quakers, Fifth Monarchy Men, Muggletonians, Ranters, etc.—and for errors and heresies like Arminianism, Socinianism, Pelagianism and various forms of 'natural religion'.<sup>7</sup> So, holding in mind the possibility that the thinking of the Savoy divines was in some way or another affected by reaction to what was happening in English religion, let us proceed.

Since the Congregational brethren used the *Articles of Religion*, this facilitated their work, which was completed and approved by the whole assembly within two weeks. The changes they made in the *Articles* were as follows. First, they omitted the following sections:

1. Sections v and vi of Chapter VII, 'Of God's Covenant with Man'.
2. Sections vi and vii of Chapter XXII, 'Of Lawful Oaths and Vows'.
3. Sections iii and iv of Chapter XXV, 'Of the Church'.
4. Section iii of Chapter XXVI, 'Of the Communion of Saints'.

Secondly, they added one completely new section and chapter.

4. The English Parliament removed the following sections or chapters from the Confession. Chap. xxx 'Of Church Censures,' Chap. xxxi, 'Of Synods and Councils', section iv of Chap. xx, 'Of Christian Liberty,' and parts of most sections in Chap. xxiv 'Of Marriage and Divorce.'
5. There were six men on the drafting committee: Goodwin, Owen, Philip Nye, William Bridge, Joseph Caryl and William Greenhill. For these men see *Dictionary of National Biography* and *Calamy Revised*, ed. A. G. Matthews, Oxford, 1934.
6. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 363.
7. No one book adequately gives the whole picture but see especially Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London 1971, and Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, Oxford, 1946.

1. Chapter XX, 'Of the Gospel, and of the extent of the Grace thereof'.
2. Section v of Chapter XXVI, 'Of the Church'.

Thirdly, they made significant changes in the wording of the following chapters.

1. Chapter VI, 'Of the fall of Man'.
2. Chapter XIV, 'Of saving Faith'.
3. Chapter XV, 'Of Repentance unto life and salvation'.
4. Chapter XVIII, 'Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation'.
5. Chapter XXIV, 'Of the Civil Magistrate'.
6. Chapter XXVI, 'Of the Church'.

Finally, there are minor verbal changes in most other chapters.

Those omissions and changes which relate to the role of the magistrate, religious liberty and church polity are easily explained in terms of the well-known differences between the Presbyterians and Independents in the period 1642 to 1660.<sup>8</sup> The other additions and changes are less easily explained and merit careful scrutiny. This is because the changes cannot merely be put down to the efforts of the Savoy divines to make the wording of the *Articles* more easily understood. Therefore, we shall first examine the content of, and reasons for, the additional section in the *Declaration* in the chapter on the Church; secondly, we shall compare their doctrines of repentance; thirdly, we shall examine the content of, and reasons for, the additional chapter on the gospel; and finally we shall compare their federal theology.

The additional section on the Church in the *Declaration* reads as follows:

As the Lord in His care and love towards His Church hath in His infinite wise providence exercised it with great variety in all ages, for the good of them that love Him, and His own glory: so according to His promise, we expect in the latter days, Antichrist being destroyed, the Jews called, and the adversaries of the kingdom of His dear Son broken, the churches of Christ being enlarged, and edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace, shall enjoy in this world a more quiet peaceable and glorious condition than they have enjoyed.

The doctrine here is an optimistic eschatology, the latter-day glory of the Church on earth. Several books<sup>9</sup> have recently shown to what extent

8. Cf. especially W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration, 1640-1660*, London, 1938.
9. E.g. G. F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints, the Congregational Way*, Oxford 1957, John F. Wilson, *Pulpit in Parliament*, Princeton, 1969, and *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel*, ed. Peter Toon, London, 1970.

the Independents were committed to an optimistic millenarianism but this fact does not explain why men of the Congregational way should state their doctrine in a section on the Church. The probable reason was that they believed that the churches in the period of the latter-day glory would be churches of the Congregational way and that in revealing to His people the true blueprint of church polity God was preparing them for the glory that was to come. This made the churches to be the 'witnesses' of Revelation 11:3. So there was a connection between the nature of the one Church both before and during the latter-day glory and that connection was the Congregational way.<sup>10</sup> In neither the *Articles of Religion* nor the *Westminster Confession* is there any hint of an optimistic eschatology or of a connection between church polity and eschatology. *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1645)<sup>11</sup> did, however, require the minister 'to pray for the propagation of the gospel and kingdom of Christ to all nations; for the conversion of the Jews, the fulness of the Gentiles, the fall of Antichrist, and the hastening of the second coming of our Lord'. These words are open to various interpretations and do not necessarily presuppose the latter-day glory of the Church.

Turning now to the doctrine of repentance we find a subtle change of emphasis in the *Declaration*. Whilst the Westminster divines described repentance primarily from the human point of view as a responsibility of men to God, the Savoy divines chose to view it in the light of God's eternal purposes and of federal theology, and therefore as a gift of God to His elect. This may be seen in sections one and two of Chapter XV of each document.

### *Articles*

- i. Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the Gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.
- ii. By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.

### *Declaration*

- i. Such of the elect as are converted at riper years, having sometime lived in the state of nature, and therein served

10. There are some interesting suggestions and insights in R. B. Carter, 'The Presbyterian-Independent Controversy... with special reference to Thomas Goodwin', Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1961.

11. This is printed in the edition of the *Westminster Confession* by the Free Presbyterian Church, pp. 369-394.

divers lusts and pleasures, God in their effectual calling giveth them repentance unto life.

- ii. Whereas there is none that doth good, and sinneth not, and the best of men may through the power and deceitfulness of their corruptions dwelling in them, with the prevalency of temptation fall into great sins and provocations: God hath in the Covenant of Grace mercifully provided, that believers so sinning and falling, be renewed through repentance unto salvation.

Though the Congregational divines insist in section v that 'the constant preaching of repentance is necessary,' this is set in the context of believers within the covenant of grace. And thus their chapter has little in it to correspond with that emphasis of the apostle Paul, 'God commands men everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30), and with the original emphasis of the sixteenth-century reformers.<sup>12</sup> It would seem, therefore, that the authors of the *Declaration* placed their emphasis in the wrong place. Being enthusiastic to maintain the sovereignty of the grace of God, they failed to emphasize adequately the all-important responsibility of men to God.

The new chapter in the *Declaration* entitled 'Of the Gospel' looks at its topic from the viewpoint of federal theology and the sovereignty of God. This may be seen in sections i and iii.

- i. The covenant of works being broken by sin, and made unprofitable unto life, God was pleased to give unto the elect the promise of Christ, the seed of the woman, as the means of calling them, and in begetting in them repentance and faith. . . .
- iii. The revelation of the Gospel unto sinners. . . is merely of the sovereign will and good pleasure of God. . . .

The gospel as "good news" to the world, and the theme of the great invitations of Scripture (Isa. 55:1ff, John 3:16ff, Rom. 10:11ff, etc.) are not to be found. Rather God's love to the elect in the eternal covenant of grace is the major idea.

The reasons for the writing and inclusion of this chapter are not wholly clear since no minutes or records of the Savoy Assembly are extant. Two suggestions, however, may be made. First, the call for the 'propagation of the Gospel' (by which was primarily meant the placing of a preaching minister in every parish of England and Wales) had been a constant exercise of the Congregational brethren. They had submitted to the Rump of the Long Parliament their *Humble Proposals for the Propagation of the Gospel* in February 1652 and as individuals they had often reminded the members of Parliament and the Council of State of

12. Cf. for example the treatment of Calvin's doctrine by F. Wendel, *John Calvin*, London, 1962, and *THE SECOND HELVETIC CONFESSION* (1566), Chap. XIV.

the need to provide a preaching ministry.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, section iii of Chapter XX reads like a series of quotations from John Owen's sermons to Parliament.<sup>14</sup> So for this reason alone it was natural that they should want a section on the gospel. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it had been amongst the sectarian gathered churches (which the opponents of Independency chose to equate with the classic Congregational way) that a host of false and heretical notions concerning the gospel had grown on fertile religious soil. These ranged from the Arminianism of John Goodwin to the strange notions of the followers of Jacob Boehme and Paracelsus.<sup>15</sup> Reacting against these notions, and the inherent Pelagianism in them, the Congregational divines felt it necessary to emphasize the doctrine of the sovereign grace of God in the gospel. But really to do this in a chapter on the gospel was not necessary since already in Chapter III 'Of God's eternal Decree', in Chapter IX 'Of Free-will,' and in Chapter X 'Of Effectual Calling,' the sovereign character of God's grace had been adequately explained. So again it would appear that the Congregational theologians placed their emphasis, as with repentance, in the wrong place. They failed to justice to both the message of the New Testament and of the Reformers of the sixteenth century. Thus when the preface explains that 'what is dispersed and by intimation in the Assemblies confession with some little addition is brought together' in Chapter XX, it is understating the matter. This great emphasis in the *Declaration* on divine sovereignty is also to be seen, though less markedly, in Chapter XIV 'Of Saving Faith' and Chapter XVIII 'Of the Assurance of Grace,' where the changes made in the *Articles* are in this direction.

The tendency of the Savoy divines to view the gospel from the standpoint of the covenant of grace would lead us to expect that in the chapters dealing with federal theology there would be a stronger emphasis on this doctrine in the *Declaration* than in the *Articles*. And, sure enough, this is what we find in Chapter VI 'Of the fall of man.'

### *Articles*

- i. Our first parents, being seduced by the subtilty and temptation of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory.

13. For a description of some of the activities of the Independents see G. F. Nuttall, 'Presbyterians and Independents', *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, Vol. X, London, 1952.
14. See e.g. the sermons printed in *Works* (ed. W. H. Goold), VIII, and preached between 1646 and 1656.
15. For Goodwin see the *D.N.B.*; for Boehme see J. J. Stoudt, *Jacob Boehme*, New York, 1968, and for Paracelsus see A. G. Debus, *The English Paracelsians*, London 1965.

### *Declaration*

- i. God having made a covenant of works and life, thereupon, with our first parents and all their posterity in them, they being seduced by the subtilty and temptation of Satan did wilfully transgress the Law of their creation and break the covenant in eating the forbidden fruit.

Here certainly the *Declaration* has a stronger emphasis on the covenant of works. It also stresses the covenant of grace more than do the *Articles*. For example, the opening section in Chapter VIII 'Of Christ the Mediator' reads as follows in both documents.

### *Articles*

- i. It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus His only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and Man. . . .

### *Declaration*

- i. It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus His only begotten Son, according to a Covenant made between them, to be the Mediator between God and Man. . . .

Furthermore, in Chapter XV 'Of Repentance' the *Declaration* uses the expression 'covenant of grace' twice whereas the *Articles* do not even mention the subject. Since no reliable study of federal theology in England in the seventeenth century exists, it is impossible dogmatically to assert that Congregational divines were more committed to it than were Presbyterians. However, since many Congregational churches had a church covenant, the idea of federal theology was probably more constantly in their minds than in those of their Presbyterian brethren.<sup>16</sup>

In conclusion, we may say that it does seem to be the case that the *Declaration of Faith* contains an unbalanced presentation of the doctrines of the gospel. Perhaps this imbalance may be seen as one root of that hyper-Calvinism which infected both Congregational and Baptist churches in the early eighteenth century. In the hands and minds of less able men than Goodwin and Owen, this great stress on federal theology became the basis of a gospel that had within it no missionary endeavour. At least this thought deserves further investigation!<sup>17</sup> One problem, however, still remains. If what has been argued above has any truth in it, how could Owen and his brethren have believed that in essence their Confession was the same as the *Articles*? The answer to this would seem to lie in the fact that the Congregational way was in 1658 a cause under both attack and siege. It was being described as the 'sink of all heresies

16. Cf. Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, pp. 70 ff.

17. In my *The Emergence of hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity 1689-1765*, London, 1967, I did not look at this possibility.

and schisms'; it wanted legal recognition under the rule of Richard Cromwell or whoever succeeded him; and it wanted to affirm its Reformed theological basis. Understandably, in such a situation, the Congregational divines overstated their case. They sincerely emphasized the sovereign grace of God not realizing they were tipping the balances too much on one side and therefore omitting or weakening an essential element in Holy Scripture, namely the responsibility of men to God. For this reason it is perhaps a good thing that the *Declaration* has never achieved anything like the wide recognition afforded to the *Westminster Confession*.<sup>18</sup>

18. It must perhaps be added that the version of the *Westminster Confession* that has been used in most large Presbyterian churches has modifications in the chapter dealing with the magistrate and religious toleration.