

# “Most Loving”: *The Love of God in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger Catechism*

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The Holy Scriptures teach very clearly that “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

*“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (ESV 1 John 4:7-10, my emphasis).*

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The Scriptures are clear that “God is love”. God has always and consistently revealed Himself as a most loving God, though His revelation was progressive throughout history and became fuller from promise to the fullness of this revelation of His deep love for sinners in Christ Jesus. Yet from God’s earliest revelation of Himself as a Glorious Redeemer of His people, He is revealed as the God who is “*gracious, merciful...abundant in goodness*” (Exodus 34:6-7). The Westminster Larger Catechism reflects this scriptural teaching about the love of God in question 7: “*What is God?*” Part of the answer to this question is that God is “*most merciful and gracious...abundant in goodness and truth*” and uses Exodus 34:6 and Psalm 117:2 as proof texts for their doctrine. The goodness of God, the mercy of God, and the grace of God all reveal God’s love toward His people. Although God is revealed as loving in Holy Scripture, does the Westminster Confession of Faith also appropriately emphasize the love of God in the same manner?

**Thesis statement:** Though God is not explicitly described as loving but in one place in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the love of God is implicitly and clearly and even thoroughly revealed throughout the Confession of Faith. While the specific references to the love of God may not be many, the heart of the Confession of Faith reveals the loving heart of God as He is revealed in Holy Scripture. As the covenant has been called the “architectonic” principle or backbone of the Confession, the love of God could be described as the heart of the Confession. The Confession of Faith is faithful to Scripture in its summary of the biblical teaching of God’s love for His people. The Westminster Assembly were faithful as both biblical theologians and confessional Christians committed to reformed catholicism.

The Westminster divines did indeed teach and emphasize throughout the Confession of Faith and Larger Catechism that God is most loving. For instance, God is described as “*most loving*” explicitly in His attributes (WCF, 2.2), in His decree (WCF, 3), God’s covenant and the revelation of His Mediator (WCF, 7-8), union with Christ, particularly in adoption (WCF, 12), sanctification (WCF, 13), perseverance (WCF, 17), and assurance of God’s love (WCF, 18). These truths could be summarized in this way: The love of God is made clear with regard to who God is in Himself (His attributes, WCF, 2.2), what He has done to order, design, and accomplish redemption in history for His people (WCF, 3), how He has condescended to faithfully commit Himself to promise in covenant (WCF, 7-8), and how He unites believers to His Beloved Son, and to continue to shed the love of God in their hearts, making them progressively holy until they enter His glorious heaven (see WCF, 12, 13, 17, 18)! It cannot be denied that for the Westminster Assembly God’s love has been revealed and manifested in an abundance of ways in redemptive history and revealed in Holy

Scripture. In fact, though there are not more explicit references to the love of God, there are two chapters particularly that reveal God's deep love for sinners. Chapter 12 on adoption and chapter 18 on assurance of faith reveal God's love very explicitly. Some in history have argued that the confession should have an additional chapter added on the love of God. But is this really necessary?<sup>1</sup> I do not think that it is. Let us look at this carefully together.

This study will be concerned with focusing on the love of God as the Westminster divines recorded it for us in the Confession and the Larger Catechism, focusing more at length particularly in chapters 12 and 18 on Adoption and on the Assurance of Faith in the Confession. Then we shall look at questions and answers from the Larger Catechism. This study is particularly interested in responding to the claims of theologians Robert Letham and T. F. Torrance both who make the surprising assertions that the divines did not write enough about the love of God, or did not write about the love of God as clearly as they should have. This is a glaring oversight for such eminent scholars to miss the clear teaching of God as "most loving" that runs throughout the Confession and the Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly. Letham and Torrance have insinuated that by the Assembly's not putting more emphasis on God's love, they could be misrepresenting the true God as a rationalistic deity, who is more like the false god of Islam.<sup>2</sup> Their concern is acceptable, but the conclusion is not. We dare not misrepresent God; this is a legitimate concern. We desire to only speak of God as He has revealed Himself, especially as we put this in a confessional form. But to suggest that the Westminster divines do truly misrepresent God, or are

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<sup>1</sup> See 1903 Revision of Standards that added "*Of the Love of God and Missions*"; see B. B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, Vol. II, pgs. 388ff, ed. John Meeter, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2001), 42-44.

<sup>2</sup> This is insinuated in Letham, but is argued more fully in Torrance. See Robert Letham, *Westminster Assembly: Reading It's Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 164. See also T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 131.

culpable of great omission in their inclusion of God's love is at best to overstep, at worst, it is to stumble from a legitimate concern to an erroneous conclusion.

## **Westminster Confession of Faith**

### **“On God the Holy Trinity”**

The work of the Westminster Assembly on *God the Holy Trinity* began on Wednesday, July 23, 1645, in Session 473. At this time, the Westminster divines discussed and began work on the doctrine of God for the Confession of Faith, including specifically the doctrine of the Trinity. In this, they proceeded in deliberation, discussion and debate about the propositions or truths concerning God that should be listed as Biblical. There was absolutely no debate or disagreement concerning what would be included in chapter 2 of the Confession of Faith.<sup>3</sup> In the final work of the Assembly found in written form in chapter 2, God is revealed specifically as “*most loving*” in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF, 2.1-2). Though this is the only place where God's love is made explicit, His love is the heart of the Confession throughout.

Strangely for some scholars, there are not more explicit language and teachings about the love of God in the Westminster Confession, and this has been even called a “weakness” and even a “culpability”. Theologian Robert Letham writes: “...The love of God is not mentioned in either the Larger Catechism or the Shorter Catechism. This is an *astonishing omission*. It can only be described as *culpable* [my emphasis].”<sup>4</sup> Letham writes that God is perfect love and “neither catechism mentions it!”<sup>5</sup> Letham agrees with theologian T. F.

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<sup>3</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers of Westminster Assembly 1643-1653*, (Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), III:637-39

<sup>4</sup> Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 163.

<sup>5</sup> Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 163.

Torrance who said that the confession would reflect the true God more accurately if it would have done “more justice to God as a *God of love*” [my emphasis].<sup>6</sup> Further, Letham says that that the Westminster Confession (2.3) “gives greatest prominence to God as omnipotent Creator and Judge, rather than as the Father”.<sup>7</sup> Theologian T. F. Torrance expresses similar concerns. He comments on the Westminster Confession, chapter 2 in this way: “Most of it was devoted to a relatively long and rather abstract account, mainly in adjectival terms and negative forms of thought of what God is in his infinite power and sovereign nature, but with only two condensed sentences on the Holy Trinity...”<sup>8</sup> Torrance finds this to be inconsistent with John Calvin, and therefore it is an implicitly an accusation of the divines’ faithfulness to catholicity.

Concerning the love of God in the Westminster Confession and the continuity with John Calvin, Torrance writes: “[The love of God] appears as an ‘addendum’ very different from John Calvin who said that there is no ‘real knowledge of God’ except through his self-revealing and self-naming as Father, Son, and Spirit”.<sup>9</sup> Torrance claims that the divines record for subsequent generations a doctrine of the Trinity that was “tacked on to a doctrine of God”.<sup>10</sup> Torrance’s concern is that this is a departure from the classical theology of the Nicene Church and gives priority to an abstract idea about the absolute sovereignty

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<sup>6</sup> Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 164. See also T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 131.

<sup>7</sup> Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 164.

<sup>8</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 130.

<sup>9</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 131.

<sup>10</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 131.

of God over His Trinitarian nature as an eternal consubstantial communion of reciprocal personal relations and thus “*as essentially and intrinsically a God of love*” [my emphasis].<sup>11</sup>

Further, Torrance writes that “God is said to be lawgiver and judge in the confession, but only said to be Father properly in his relation to those who are elected, justified, and “made partakers of the grace of adoption...”<sup>12</sup> Torrance’s legitimate concern is that he desires to stress that God is a communion of love over against a mere abstract presentation of God in his sovereign power. He writes that this focus on the eternal decree of God in the Westminster Confession of Faith over the incarnation of God’s Son “revealed a weakness to provide ground for dangerous teachings, separating the atoning work of Christ from the intrinsic nature and character of God as love”.<sup>13</sup> But both Letham’s and Torrance’s assertions are wrong. Chapter 2 *On God the Holy Trinity* has been laid out particularly with an eye toward teaching two important things: (1) To show the progressive revelation of God from Old Testament promise to New Testament fulfillment in sections 1-3. (2) It is designed thoughtfully to reveal God in Himself, God in His attributes, and God in His three distinct Persons and communion in the Godhead.

In chapter 2 *On God the Holy Trinity*, we should note that there are two sections on God’s Person and attributes that precede the third section on God as Triune. This is with the express purpose that there is progressive revelation from Scripture in sections 1-3, from

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<sup>11</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 131.

<sup>12</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 131.

<sup>13</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 132-33. Theologian Ligon Duncan writes in a compendium of essays about the Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: “Torrance regularly charges federalism with making holiness and justice central to God’s attributes and love and mercy peripheral.” Dr. Duncan also points out that Torrance’s criticism rests on a false antithesis between God’s justice and mercy. Ligon Duncan, ed., *Westminster Confession into 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 484.

Ligon Duncan, ed., *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Vol. 3. (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2009), III: 484-85.

the unity of God to the tri-unity of God. Despite the criticism of chapter 2 of the Confession, suggesting that the love of God is not emphasized enough, we should understand this is designed carefully by the divines as a theological layout of God's progressive revelation in Holy Scripture. We might think that perhaps the third section would be better at the beginning of the chapter? This might be good. This could put a proper focus on the love of God, and focus on the tri-unity of God as the relational God that lives in everlasting communion and love with each person of the Godhead; this would be a biblical presentation. But is this necessary? I think the theological layout of progressive revelation is important to note, as well as the three parts of God's revelation of Himself in His essence, His attributes, and in His triune personality. This criticism is nothing new, and in fact, similar criticism was answered others in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theologian Francis Beattie taught just this truth about God's progressive revelation in chapter 2 of the Confession against those who argued that the love of God was not emphasized enough. Beattie taught that chapter 2 of the Confession is divided into three parts: 1. God's nature; 2. God's attributes; and 3. God's tri-personality.<sup>14</sup> Beattie admits that while the confession gives prominence to the subject of the attributes of God, it also reveals the heart of God very clearly. In the Confessions' statement of God being "most loving", he says that "this is a wide, all-comprehensive statement of the love of God in all its aspects and exercises, as set forth in the Scriptures."<sup>15</sup> To the charge that there should be more included about God's love in the Confession, Beattie responded: "The Confession cannot...be justly charged with giving no proper place to the love of God in its creed

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<sup>14</sup> Francis Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards* (Greenville, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>15</sup> Francis Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, 58.

statement.”<sup>16</sup> The claims that God is not sufficiently revealed as a loving God in the Confession of faith has no merit.

Furthermore, though “*most loving*” is used only once to describe God’s character in WCF 2.1 as we have seen, nevertheless, there are many adjectives throughout the Confession that reveal the heart of God as also the heart of the whole Confession. Dr. Chad Van Dixhoorn has studied the adjectives used of God and at the top of the list are “love and mercy” more than any other description of God.<sup>17</sup> Dr. Vandixhoorn wrote thoughtfully in responding to criticism such as Letham and Torrance, and to show that the Divines were excellent biblical theologians as well as faithful reformed catholics:

*...The assembly’s various references to the love and mercy of God far outstrip any other adjectives or descriptions of God’s character offered by these post-Reformation pastors and theologians.*<sup>18</sup>

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Additionally, theologian and pastor J. V. Fesko makes an important distinction between God’s relationship to creation and His creatures, and in His relationship to other persons of the Godhead that is revealed in chapter 2 of the Confession. Fesko lists God’s “relative” adjectives, or how God is revealed toward those in creation, particularly His own beloved people as “*loving, gracious, merciful, longsuffering*” and that the descriptions of God’s love tops the list.<sup>19</sup> We should not pass over this too quickly, but appreciate that God’s heart of love is made known throughout the Confession. God is thoroughly revealed in the Confession of Faith as a God of love. He is most loving to His people, particularly in His

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<sup>16</sup> Francis Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, 58.

<sup>17</sup> Lecture by Chad Van Dixhoorn, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Westminster Assembly class notes, May 18, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Chad Vandixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 32.

<sup>19</sup> J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 100-101.



condescending mercies of covenant and salvation through the Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ (WCF, 7-8).

### **Westminster Assembly: Classical Reformed Catholicism**

The Westminster divines were theologically consistent with Reformed teaching on the love of God that preceded them. The divines considered themselves truly Reformed and catholic in their confessional and pastoral intentions. They viewed themselves as those building upon and passing down what they had already received as orthodox teaching about God, including His great love, mercy, and grace for His people. The divines' teaching on the love of God is consistent with prior Reformed teaching and confessions because they did not want to "isolate themselves from the rest of the church, but saw their broader engagement with other periods of history and other theological traditions as evidence of their Catholicity."<sup>20</sup> There should be no concern that the Westminster Assembly was inconsistent with reformed teaching before them *contra* T. F. Torrance. They truly were Reformed Catholics. They were faithfully committed to standing on the shoulders of faithful confessions and teachers that had preceded them. They had a very pregnant knowledge of their special place in history, and the special circumstances in which they were working. They did not fail to emphasize a reformed catholicity throughout their working on the Confession of Faith.<sup>21</sup> For instance, when the divines began the work that would eventually culminate in the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms*, they began with work on the *39 Articles*, specifically Article 3 "Of the Holy Trinity". Alexander Mitchell wrote that there was a correspondence between the Irish Articles and the Westminster Confession, "both in

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<sup>20</sup> Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards*, 25-31.

general arrangements and the wording of many sections”.<sup>22</sup> Particularly important for our study is the fact that chapter 2 on God the Holy Trinity resembled and determined its character from the Irish Articles “both in expression and general arrangements.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, there were important similarities in the presentation of the Confession as in the Irish Articles, and both revealed a catholic agreement as to the proper emphasis put on God’s love both explicitly and implicitly.

Let us look at chapter 2, section 3 more particularly. The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2.3 gives us a beautiful biblical representation of God’s triune nature and implicit in this is His love that is more fully revealed in other places of the Confession.

***WCF 2.3: On God the Holy Trinity:*** *In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. (1) The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; (2) the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son. (3) (1) 1 John 5:7; Matt. 3:16,17; Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14. (2) John 1:14,18. (3) John 15:26; Gal. 4:6.*

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This section reveals the loving and gracious nature of God revealed in Himself, in three Persons, but also the grace, mercy and love that is demonstrated toward and revealed to God’s people. Because God is relational, and lives in glorious and happy communion within Himself as the Triune God, He invites sinners through the Lord Jesus to partake in that same community and communion. John 1:14 speaks of the Glory of the only Son “from the Father” to emphasize the distinction between Father and the Son (John 1:1, 18), but also to emphasize the Father’s loving outreach to His people, and the Father’s sending of Christ Jesus to redeem a people for Himself. This was with an eye toward making worshippers,

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<sup>22</sup> Alexander Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1897), 385.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, 389.

but also sons and daughters who could enjoy communion with the living God. This clear revelation of the Triune God in WCF, 2.3 should cause us to pause and consider the loving heart of God as it is laid out particularly in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

In a recent important book on The Trinity, theologian Robert Letham writes that Augustine was the first theologian to elaborate the doctrine of the Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son.<sup>24</sup> In fact, theologians in the past have emphasized that God is a community of persons among whom love is manifested for one another.<sup>25</sup> The implications for this are that God is a relational God, the Persons of the trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In His relations within the Godhead (*opera ad intra*) and in His relations toward His creation, particularly His church (*opera ad extra*) reveal that God is loving in His decree, providence, covenant, and union with Christ by the Spirit. These are all radical and robust displays of God's love found in the theology of the Westminster Assembly's Confession of Faith.

It is surprising for Robert Letham to criticize the Westminster divines on not speaking more on the love of God when the divines have an orthodox, catholic, reformed, and full and clear presentation of the Triune God in the Confession. In fact, Letham writes in his most excellent book on the Trinity that

*God is a triune communion of persons. Love is intrinsic to who He is...love...belongs to Who He is in Himself in the undivided communion of the three persons. The Father loves the Son. The Son loves the Father. The Father loves the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit loves the Father. The Son loves the Holy Spirit. The*

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<sup>24</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 200.

<sup>25</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 352.

*Holy Spirit loves the Son. This reciprocal love of the three persons exists in the unbreakable union of the undivided Trinity.*<sup>26</sup>

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And this revelation of God's love in His Triune nature is clearly presented in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

To be fair to Dr. Letham, it seems probable that one of his concerns about the way that chapter 2 of the Confession is laid out comes from the fact that he would have desired God's personality or personal nature to be revealed first. In other words, that the relational and loving nature of God as Triune would be placed in the first section to avoid any misunderstanding of God as merely an abstract deity of justice and power. This seems to be the case because Dr. Letham clearly writes elsewhere in his book on the Trinity:

*Only a God who is triune can be personal. Only the Holy Trinity can be love. Human love cannot possibly reflect the nature of God unless God is a Trinity of persons in union and communion. A solitary monad [as in Judaism and Islam] cannot love and, since it cannot love, neither can it be a person.*<sup>27</sup>

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But as it has been discussed, this layout or presentation was concerned with showing the progressive nature of God's revelation in Holy Scripture. There is no reason for criticism here. While the concern to rightly represent God as He is revealed in Scripture is legitimate, the conclusion about the Confession of Faith being culpable for a misrepresentation is illegitimate. God is revealed clearly as loving in the Confession of Faith.

### **Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 12, "On Adoption"**

We can see clearly that in the revision of the *39 Articles* and ultimately the Confession of Faith that the divines produced, their doctrine of God, particularly His love and

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<sup>26</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 477.

<sup>27</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 446.

graciousness and goodness is expansive and robust.<sup>28</sup> Readers can particularly note as well the love of God in the Assembly's frequent "mention" of the doctrine of adoption.<sup>29</sup> Although some have criticized the Puritans for saying little on the glorious biblical teaching of adoption, this is just not true.<sup>30</sup> Dr. Joel Beeke writes that the Puritans were "fond of stressing the transforming power, superlative value, and surprising wonder of adoption. They spoke often of its greatness, excellency, dignity, and comprehensiveness."<sup>31</sup> The doctrine of adoption was a precious doctrine for the Puritans in general, and the Westminster Assembly in particular in that its inclusion in the Confession of Faith is unique to other Reformed confessions of that time. In fact, the divines' inclusion of this separate chapter emphasized their clear teaching and focus on God's love for his people in Christ.

***WCF 12.1: On Adoption:*** *All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption: (1) by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; (2) have His name put upon them, (3) receive the Spirit of adoption; (4) have access to the throne of grace with boldness; (5) are enabled to cry, Abba, Father; (6) are pitied, (7) protected, (8) provided for, (9) and chastened by Him as by a Father; (10) yet never cast off, (11) but sealed to the day of redemption, (12) and inherit the promises, (13) as heirs of everlasting salvation. (14) (1)Eph. 1:5; Gal. 4:4,5. (2)Rom. 8:17; John 1:12. (3)Jer. 14:9; 2 Cor. 6:18; Rev. 3:12. (4)Rom. 8:15. (5)Eph. 3:12; Rom. 5:2. (6)Gal. 4:6. (7)Ps. 103:13. (8)Prov. 14:26. (9)Matt. 6:30,32; 1 Pet. 5:7. (10)Heb. 12:6. (11)Lam. 3:31. (12)Eph. 4:30. (13)Heb. 6:12. (14)1 Pet. 1:3,4; Heb. 1:14.*

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<sup>28</sup> Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers of Westminster Assembly*, Vol. V:324.

<sup>29</sup> Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers of Westminster Assembly*, Vol. V:93.

<sup>30</sup> See J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP), 1973, 207. Packer writes: "The Puritan teaching on the Christian life, so strong in other ways, was notably deficient on adoption." Quoted in Joel R. Beeke, "Transforming Power and Comfort: The Puritans on Adoption" in *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne R. Spear* (Phillipsburg, NJ: 2007), 63.

<sup>31</sup> Joel R. Beeke, "Transforming Power and Comfort: The Puritans on Adoption" in Anthony T. Selvaggio, ed. *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne R. Spear*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: 2007), 67.

What is the essence of the believer's adoption? That God legally declares believers righteous before Him in justification, but also (very importantly!) legally adopts believers into His family, giving believers His own name, granting privileges of being His children, and granting them a rich and eternal inheritance in Him, and with Him. We might imagine a judge that would pardon crimes or sins against the law, but would not necessarily embrace and receive lawbreakers into his family. Yet God has lovingly pardoned the sins of His people, and received them as sons—as His own dear children!! Additionally, as revealed in the Confession of Faith on adoption, God lovingly pities, protects, provides, and chastises believers for their good as His children. God is a kind and loving God who reveals Himself as “Father” to believers. Adoption is the highest revelation of God's love for sinners in Christ.

Furthermore, the Confession teaches on adoption that this relationship places believers “under the Fatherly care and dispensations” of God (WLC, Q74). This is the love of a Father, and not a judge, nor an abstract, rationalistic, mere God of judgment. This is the love of a Judge that has become Father through being “just and the justifier of all who believe in Christ Jesus” (cf. Rom. 3:24-26). In response to Torrance, God has revealed Himself as a loving God who is also just. There is no tension between God's justice and mercy in Christ because of the doctrine of adoption. The Confession teaches that adoption reveals a God who has not only given His only begotten, or unique Son for sinners to be saved, but has made them His children. This reveals God's love very particularly that He cares for us and takes care of us, leaving us no reason for worries, anxieties, frights, nor fears! Our Lord Jesus said clearly:

*If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (ESV Luke 11:13) .... "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? .... Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all (ESV Matthew 6:26, 31-32)*

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The Confession continues to reveal God's love in teaching that the believer's adoption is because of the Father's love from before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4-6); it is because of the Son's redemptive work in willingly coming as our big brother to redeem us and to obtain for us the Spirit of Sonship (Gal. 4:4-7), and it is the Spirit's work to seal and further reveal this reality to our hearts (Rom. 8:15-16, 26; cf. Eph. 3:16-19). Adoption changes one's relationship to God so that God is no longer merely the great and powerful Creator, and because of the fall, He is no longer the Judge, but He is now a merciful and kind and caring Heavenly Father, that causes believers to cry out: "*Abba, Father*" (Rom. 8:15). In Christ, believers are now the very heirs of God, and like Jesus Christ, the Father's dearly and beloved children (WCF, 12.1; 18.2; WLC 39; WLC 69). The Scriptures teach this love of God in adoption:

*What manner of love has God the Father bestowed upon us that we are called the children of God, and that is what we are! (1 Jo. 3:1-2).*

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Note particularly that in the *Westminster Larger Catechism* adoption like justification is described as an "*act of the free grace of God*" impressing upon us that it is once and for all, whereas sanctification is a "*work of God's free grace*" that continues throughout the Christian life (WLC 74). We should never separate justification and sanctification, though we should make the proper distinctions between the "act" and "work" of God's free grace (act is final, work is continuing). The same is true with adoption. In light of a believer's

adoption, though the believer formerly walked as one who loved the world, with the desires of the flesh, the eyes, and the pride of life (1 Jo. 2:15-17), she no longer loves the world in this way because the world is passing away and she desires to do the will of our Heavenly Father (1 Jo. 2:17). In fact, because of God's once for all "act" and as a privilege of being children of God, believers are heirs with Christ and now begin to take upon a family resemblance, knowing that one day we shall be fully like Him as part of God's ongoing "work" of sanctification in believers (1 Jo. 3:2-3; Phil. 1:6; cf. Titus 2:11-14).

The Confession teaches that as adopted sons in Christ believers know that they possess the encouraging word of our Heavenly Father through their labors: *"Well down my good and faithful servant"* (cf. Heb. 6:10-12). Believers know that they have in union with Christ the Father's blessed affirmation saying: *"This is my Beloved...with whom I am well pleased."* Believers in Christ are part of a new family and as the Lord Jesus taught, they are to display the love of the Father in their love to one another (John 15:9-16). In fact, as the Father has loved Christ, so Christ has loved His own in this same way and this is the motivation for doing His commandments with eager joy (John 15:12ff). Love will characterize the children of God as they love one another (1 Jo. 4:7-21). *We love because He first loved us* (1 Jo. 4:19). The Confession of Faith reveals God's deep love for sinners in Christ, particularly manifested in adoption, and gives every reason to be assured of His love. Although unique in emphasizing adoption as a separate chapter in a Confession of Faith, the Divines were not unique, but plaining reforming catholics in emphasizing the love of God in the Confession in including this important doctrine.



## **Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 18: “On the Assurance of Faith”**

The Westminster Confession, chapter 18 “On Assurance” more particularly means “On assurance *of God’s love*”. The assurance that a believer can come to is an assurance that they are loved of God. This, too, clearly reveals God as “most loving” and continues to demonstrate the Assembly’s sharp focus on God’s love to His people. This emphasis on assurance also reveals the pastors’ hearts that wrote this Confession. What a glorious teaching for God’s people that the Confession would include that a believer could be assured of God’s love for them. Surely this reveals God as “most loving” in His bringing believers to great confidence in His love and grace?! Assurance in our sanctification as believers demonstrates God’s deep love for His people. God puts graces into the hearts of believers, and these graces are strengthened (WLC 75). The love of God prevents the falling away, or apostasy of Christians ultimately because of the High Priestly intercession of Jesus at God’s right hand.

***WCF 18.1: On Assurance of Faith:*** *Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God, and estate of salvation; (1) which hope of theirs shall perish; (2) yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, (3) and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God; which hope shall never make them ashamed. (4) (1)Job 8:13,14; Micah 3:11; Deut. 29:19; John 8:41. (2)Matt. 7:22,23. (3)1 John 2:3; 1 John 3:14,18,19,21,24; 1 John 5:13. (4)Rom. 5:2,5 [my emphasis].*

*WCF 18.2 This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope; (1) but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, (2) the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, (3) the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God: (4) which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption. (5) (1)Heb. 6:11,19; (2)Heb. 6:17,18. (3)2 Pet. 1:4,5,10,11; 1 John 2:3;*

1 John 3:14; 2 Cor. 1:12. (4)Rom. 8:15,16. (5)Eph. 1:13,14; Eph. 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:21,22 [my emphasis].

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The Confession lovingly and pastorally teaches that believers are saved only through the grace of God found in Christ alone for salvation. Sinners must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in their union with Him desire to serve Him sincerely. If one has true faith, then she will also have works to demonstrate that true and saving faith (James 2:14-18; cf. Gal. 5:6). True believers desire for their faith to be seen in loving Christ *“in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Him”* (WCF 18.1). God is loving in making sure that believers can be *“assured of their eternal election”* (WCF 3.8), and be *“infallibly assured that they are in a state of grace”* (WLC 80; cf. WCF 18.2),

The Confession teaches us in chapter 18 that there are three important aspects of assurance of faith for the believer. Believers united to Jesus Christ may have an infallible assurance of faith because of three important things: (1) Believing God’s promises in His holy word: The truth of God’s Word, particularly the promises of God found in Holy Scripture. This is the infallible foundation for assurance of our faith. Simply put, Christians believe God’s promises; believers *trust* that God’s Word is true (2 Cor. 1:20-22). (2) Believing fruits are produced in the life of the believer: There is evidence in possessing some fruits inwardly in the heart and conscience, and outward fruits that show forth that we are the sons of God. These marks of grace or good fruits should flow out of a sincere, regenerated heart (*“You will know the tree by the fruit it bears...”*- Matt. 7:16ff). A believer can know that they not only possess a desire to will to do good but they seek by faith with sincerity to do good in gratitude for what Christ has done (Phil. 2:12-13). (3) The testimony of the Holy Spirit: The *“Spirit of Sonship”* testifies with believers’ spirits (or their heart)

that they can have confidence and joy that they are the children of God, and cry out in troubles and every day needs, “*Abba, Father*” (Rom. 8:15). The Spirit seals believers unto the Day of Redemption, or gives them the assurance that they are truly possessed and loved by God the Father in Christ Jesus. This knowledge of God’s love can lead to deep experiential joy, like being loved by a spouse, or basking in the love of a faithful Christian mother or father. This is a very clear demonstration of God’s love in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and one that should bring great joy to God’s people.

The Confession teaches that all believers possess saving faith, but not all believers with saving faith possess assurance of faith (*“It does not so belong to the essence of faith”* as the Confession teaches). This coming to assurance may take a long time, and this may be through much conflict against Satan and sin. But one can come to this assurance by using the ordinary means that Christ has kindly and generously given to His church, such as the word, sacrament, prayer, fellowship. These are means of grace that the risen-ascended Christ has given to His people so that they might mature in Him, and come to an assurance of God’s love. In fact, God has commanded His children that they are to give all diligence to make our calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:3ff; 2 Cor. 13:5). This assurance of God’s love should not make one loose in our walk before God, but makes one joyful, and prayerful, and watchful, and should grant them a deeper desire to please God in Christ. Maturing and growing in sanctification are not optional for the Christian life, they are required:

*And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him... (1 Jo. 2:3-5).*

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## Westminster Larger Catechism and the Love of God

The Larger Catechism has been called a “mine of fine gold theologically, historically, and spiritually”.<sup>32</sup> The Larger Catechism is a “full, balanced, edifying summary of the Christian faith.”<sup>33</sup> In many important ways the *Larger Catechism* seeks to exegete and expound upon the Confession of Faith. This means that what we learn more concisely in the Confession, we have unpacked further with proper application in the *Larger Catechism*. If we want to find out more doctrinally from what is written concisely in the Confession, we can usually find it expounded in the *Larger Catechism*. Although we see clearly thus far that the love of God is clearly revealed in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, we also find the love of God emphasized very poignantly and yet expounded more extensively in the *Larger Catechism*.

In the Larger catechism, particularly in Question 13 on God’s decree, we learn of God’s grace toward His own. We find that the decree, far from being merely a rationalistic statement about a judgmental and all-powerful and sovereign God who decrees,<sup>34</sup> is actually rooted in God’s love for His people. Further then, we have the love of God, particularly the heart of God out of which the decree of God comes to pass in redemptive history. The Larger Catechism puts the emphasis in Question 13: “...*Out of his mere love...*” God has especially decreed eternally and immutably, but lovingly. Thus the decree reveals God’s heart of love. The Larger Catechism says:

*Larger Catechism, 13: What hath God especially decreed concerning angels and men? A. God, by an eternal and immutable decree, out of his mere love, for the praise of his glorious grace, to be manifested in due time, hath elected some angels to glory;(1) and in Christ hath chosen some men to eternal life, and the*

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<sup>32</sup>W. Robert Godfrey, “Larger Catechism” in *To Glorify and Enjoy God: A Commemoration of the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 129.

<sup>33</sup> Godfrey, “Larger Catechism” in *To Glorify and Enjoy God*, 138.

<sup>34</sup> That some have criticized as undermining the atonement. See T. F. Torrance’s criticism above.

*means thereof:(2) and also, according to his sovereign power, and the unsearchable counsel of his own will, (whereby he extendeth or withholdeth favour as he pleaseth,) hath passed by and foreordained the rest to dishonour and wrath, to be for their sin inflicted, to the praise of the glory of his justice.(3) (1)1 Tim. 5:21 (2)Eph. 1:4-6; 2 Thess. 2:13,14. (3)Rom. 9:17,18,21,22; Matt. 11:25,26; 2 Tim. 2:20; Jude 4; 1 Pet 2:8 [my emphasis].*

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Dr. Letham particularly comments that “election is placed squarely in the context of the love and grace of God...”<sup>35</sup> “Human beings predestinated to life have been chosen *in Christ* [emphasis]. This is due to the sheer grace and love of God.”<sup>36</sup>

Further, the Larger Catechism through question and answer lays out the sin of mankind against their Creator and Lord. The Catechism teaches that though mankind has rebelled against their Creator and Lord, and fallen into an estate of sin and misery, God will not leave some of them in this estate. In fact, the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 30, declares God’s gospel love and heart of compassion for sinners who have been plunged into the mire of sin and misery in their rebellion against Him. Why does God choose or decree to deliver the elect out of a perishing estate of sin and misery, and bring them into an estate of salvation? One very important reason and emphasis is because of God’s “*mere love and mercy*”. This love and mercy of God is even more clearly manifested in *Westminster Larger Catechism*, question 30.

*Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 30: “Doth God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery? A. God doth not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery,(1) into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Works;(2) but of his mere love and mercy delivereth his elect out of it, and bringeth them into an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Grace.(3) (1)1 Thess. 5:9. (2)Gal. 3:10,12. (3)Tit. 3:4-7; Gal. 3:21; Rom. 3:20-22” [my emphasis].*

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<sup>35</sup> Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 182 (cf. WCF, 3.5).

<sup>36</sup> Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 186 (cf. WCF 3.5).

The Larger Catechism roots the whole of election in the heart and love of God. The Covenant of Grace is a revelation of the “grace and truth” that came through Jesus Christ, the only unique (“Begotten”, KJV) Son of God, who makes the Father known (cf. John 1:16-18). This reveals the clear love of God as a God of love from before the foundation of the world that elected His own “in love” as Ephesians 1:4-5 teaches very clearly. Again, we see the Westminster Divines as being consistent with biblical revelation on the love of God as revealed in Holy Scripture.

What closer relationship in love could a person have with the triune God but in union and communion with Him? While creatures remain always distinct from their Creator, and keep their individual identities, nevertheless, they are privileged to be in mystical union with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and to enjoy communion or an ongoing relationship with all three Persons of the Godhead. *Larger Catechism*, Question 65 emphasizes this union and communion with God that is enjoyed now partially by God’s Spirit in this present age, and then more fully in the age to come when Christ returns and restores the heavens and the earth.

*Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 65: What special benefits do the members of the invisible church enjoy by Christ? A. The members of the invisible church by Christ enjoy union and communion with him in grace and glory.(1) (1)John 17:21; Eph. 2:5,6; John 17:24 [my emphasis].*

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Professor Letham writes that “...All of God’s grace is said to be found in union and communion with Christ.”<sup>37</sup> We should note here that all of the special benefits of the members of Christ’s Church is to realize and to enjoy union and communion with Christ in both grace and glory. This is partially revealed now by the Holy Spirit in this present age,

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<sup>37</sup> Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 242.

but will be more fully revealed in glory in the age to come. Questions 65-90 in the Larger Catechism are purposely and intentionally unpacking or exegeting the great love of God for sinners in Christ, and the special love of God that is expressed very clearly in the believer's union and communion with Christ. Particularly revealed in this section of the Larger Catechism are the blessings of the love of God, such as justification, adoption, sanctification, good works, assurance of faith, and perseverance unto eternal life. Our union and communion with Christ begins in our effectual calling, that stems from the "almighty power and grace [of God], whereby, out of his free and especiall love [emphasis mine] to His elect (WLC, Q67).

According to the *Larger Catechism*, the believer's perseverance, or completing his Christian life is also based on the unchangeable love of the Father, our union with Christ, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (see LC, 79; WCF, 17.1-2). What a joy that believers can experience in knowing that their faith will not ultimately fail them, though tried and tested many times, often stumbling in weakness, and committing sin against God. Yet believer can know that because of the "unchangeable love of God" and his decree and covenant that He has condescended to make, He will keep them in their faith, and give to them perseverance until the end. Those who are truly God's children will see Him face to face and become as He is (cf. 1 John 3:1-2).

*Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 79: May not true believers, by reason of their imperfections, and the many temptations and sins they are overtaken with, fall away from the state of grace? A. True believers, by reason of the unchangeable love of God,(1) and his decree and covenant to give them perseverance,(2) their inseparable union with Christ, [my emphasis] (3) his continual intercession for them,(4) and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them,(5) can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace,(6) but are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.(7) (1)Jer. 31:3 (2)2 Tim. 2:19; Heb. 13:20,21; 2 Sam.*

23:5 (3)1 Cor. 1:8,9 (4)Heb. 7:25; Luke 22:32 (5)1 John 3:9; 1 John 2:27 (6)Jer. 32:40; John 10:28 (7)1 Pet. 1:5 [my emphasis].

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Even in death, the believer perseveres and conquers in her union and communion with Christ! (cf. Heb. 2:14-18; Rom. 8:31-39). God's love particularly continues toward His own people in and through death. What love that the Heavenly Father would help His own persevere through one of the hardest times of challenge in our lives—at our very deaths. In the *Larger Catechism* Question 85, we are taught that “...Although they [believers] die, yet it is *out of God's love* [my emphasis], to free them perfectly from sin and mercy...” God has turned death into a door or window through which the believer passes to go from walking by faith to seeing Christ and His glory face to face (2 Cor. 3:18; 5:6-10).

### **A Summary of the Confession and Catechism**

To summarize what we have learned, and particularly to stress the love of God as it is clearly revealed in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger Catechism, we might say or emphasize that God has chosen His people in Christ “*out of His mere grace and love*” (WCF 3.5; WLC 13), delivers His own dear children out of an estate of sin and misery because of His “*mere love and mercy*” (WLC 30), who in their effectual calling whereby God “*out of His free and special love to His elect*” (WLC 67) gives to believers a faith in their union with Christ that works through love (WCF 11.2). This faith given as a gift of God's love will cause the saints to persevere unto the end and never fall away from the state of grace because “*of the unchangeable love of God*” (WLC 79). This perseverance flows from the “*free and unchangeable love of God the Father*” (WCF 17.2), and these truths about God increase the believers' love for God (WCF 18.1, 3).



The God of love has revealed His love in Christ to produce children who will experience God's love in union and communion with Him, enjoying a *"sense of God's love"* for them (WLC 83). This will cause them to love God and others as themselves (WCF 18.4; 26:1). Even in death, the love of God frees believers from the estate of sin and misery and so turns this cursed threat into a doorway of hope to a new creation (WLC 85). The love of God produces more lovers (WLC 102). This love is clearly revealed in the Westminster Confession. Because God first loved us, we love Him and others (cf. 1 John 4:10-11). This love of God is clearly manifested in Holy Scripture and in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Larger Catechism*.

## **Conclusion**

Though God is only once described clearly as "most loving", he is nevertheless revealed constantly and regularly and consistently and robustly throughout the *Westminster Confession* and the *Larger Catechism*. The Westminster Divines were both biblical theologians as well as reformed catholics in every way, and they sought to continue to emphasize God's love very clearly. It is undeniable that the Westminster divines stressed clearly in its doctrine that God was a God of love and that His salvation in Christ flowed forth from this love of His for His own.

In fact, the doctrine of the decree was not a mere rationalistic statement about the power and sovereignty of God, but was sweetened intensely by the fact that this one God in three Persons elected and decreed all things that come to pass out of *"mere love and mercy"* for His people. Furthermore, although love is not a specific attribute that is repeated in the

Confession and Catechisms, nevertheless love is the defining heart of all of God's character and actions that are revealed in it.

God is a God of love, and He is indeed most loving, and the Westminster Assembly makes this abundantly clear. Against some criticisms, even suggested culpabilities, I think that this is an overreaction to a legitimate concern, but I believe this paper has clearly shown that the conclusions that some have made about the concerns are unfounded and wrong. While stressing the love of God and His relational character should be at the heart of our theology, and this should be a concern to make this clear, the Westminster Assembly is not found culpable or guilty of such a sin. Rather, the Assembly's concern was to stress the love of God and His relational character as the backbone and heart of the Confession of Faith.

This paper has proven that though God is not explicitly described as loving but in one place in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the love of God is implicit and clear throughout the Confession. While the references specifically to the love of God may not be many, the heart of the Confession of Faith reveals the loving heart of God as He is revealed in Holy Scripture. As the covenant has been called the "architectonic" principle or backbone of the Confession of Faith, the love of God could be described as the heart of the Confession. The Confession of Faith is faithful to Scripture in its summary of the biblical teaching of God's love for His people. The Westminster Assembly were faithful as both biblical theologians and confessional Christians committed to reformed catholicism.

**CRB**

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