

Westminster Confession of Faith (Reformed/Presbyterian Studies and Theology, Introductory, Hilary 2023–24)

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Course Description

It is no exaggeration to say that the Westminster Confession of Faith is one of the most important confessional documents produced by Protestants. Indeed, in the world of Presbyterianism, it has remained the most common Presbyterian confessional document since the mid-17th century. Richard Baxter famously claimed that “as far as I am able to judge by the Information of all History of that kind, and by any other Evidences left us, the Christian World, since the days of the Apostles, had never a Synod of more Excellent Divines (taking one thing with another) than this Synod.” (*Reliquiae Baxterianae*)

Through a close reading of the Confession, this course will cover the sources, history, theology, and pastoral relevance of this important early modern Reformed symbol. Attention will be paid to both its positive theological commitments as well as the various heterodoxies the Confession wishes to avoid. This course will also give an eye to some of the intentionally broad language, allowing for diversity of opinion within the confessional framework. Finally, this course will discuss some of the theological debates held at the Assembly, providing valuable context to the final draft of the Confession. This course will be especially beneficial for those seeking ordination in a church confessing the Westminster Confession.

Course Format

The format of the course will be predominantly one of guided discussion. The instructor will often be doing most of the talking, but generally to illuminate and draw out themes from the text for discussion, rather than in straight-up lectures. Thus, students will be expected to come having read and engaged with the text selection for the week, and with thoughts prepared to contribute.

Class readings will focus both on primary and secondary literature. General weekly reading will average around 100 pages.

Classes will meet via Zoom for two hours each week and will be recorded for later viewing by students who cannot participate. Additional student participation and instructor interaction can take place on our Discord channel.

We will use Google Classroom. All grades, video links, and coursework will be uploaded to Google Classroom.

Course Objectives

Objectives for this course include: (1) to provide a close analysis of the text of the WCF; (2) to appreciate theological background and theological controversies behind the language of the WCF (3) to discuss some of the more difficult interpretive questions, given modern Presbyterian debates.

Auditing

Auditors are not required to attend class live or submit assignments, but may participate in Zoom meetings, Discord, Google Classroom, and access recordings. If the time does not work for you, you can switch to auditing or to another course. See the drop/switch policy on the Course Catalog or M.Litt. FAQ. Students are entitled to a full refund if the chosen time does not work for them. *Please email j.thiele@davenantinstitute.org with any changes, requests, or questions.*

Course Requirements

1. Weekly readings (due before our meeting each week).
2. Weekly interaction with fellow participants and the instructor in live class sessions.
3. Students taking the class for credit or for a degree can have (at most) two excused absences from live class participation without penalty.

Additional Course Requirements for Course Credit and Masters Students:

1. Attentive and sustained participation in class is the primary requirement. For-credit students may have two excused absences. (20% of final grade) [All Students]
2. Weekly (10) 1-page, typed, **single** spaced, in 12-point Times New Roman font, reflections which engage with the assigned readings for that day. These may range from a simple digest of the material to an engagement with and reflection upon a single aspect of the reading. (25% of final grade) [Masters Students Only]
3. Oral examination: At the conclusion of the course, the professor will schedule a 15-30-minute Zoom session to assess you on your mastery of the relevant concepts and material from the course. (25% of final grade) [Masters Students Only]
4. One (1) 12–15-page essay exploring a topic related to the course and approved by the instructor. More details to come. (50% of final grade) [For-Credit Students Only].

5. Weekly (10) Reading Questions. In order to stimulate discussion, Write 5 thoughtful questions for in-class discussion. (30% of final grade) [All Students]

Grading Scale

A	93–100%
A-	90–92.99%
B+	87–89.99%
B	83–86.99%
B-	80–82.9%
C+	77–79.99%
C	73–76.99%
C-	70–72.99%
D+	67–69.99%
D	63–66.99%
D-	60–62.99%
F	59.99% or less

Required Course Texts

Obviously, the text for this course is the WCF. If you wish to get a hardcopy (or a nice one), I recommend this [one](#).

There are many online versions. Given that I am OPC, I typically use this [one](#), which is one of the American versions (slightly altered from the one above).

If you are interested in an early modern copy, this is a good [one](#).

Secondary Reading (Pick One):

17th Century:

[David Dickson](#).

18th Century:

[Associate Reformed Synod](#).

19th Century:

[Robert Shaw.](#)

[A. A. Hodge.](#)

[John MacPherson.](#)

[Francis Beattie.](#)

20th and 21st Century:

[J. V. Fesko.](#) (NB: This is a theological survey, not strictly chapter-by chapter)

[Robert Letham.](#) (NB: This is a theological survey, not strictly chapter-by chapter)

[Chad VanDixhoorn.](#)

[Gordon Clark.](#)

[Wayne Spear.](#)

[G. I. Williamson.](#)

[R. C. Sproul.](#)

[Rowland Ward.](#)

All other required readings will be supplied.

Further Reading:

[Westminster Confession of Faith into the 21st Century.](#) 3 vols.

[Edward D. Morris.](#) (NB: This is a theological survey, not strictly chapter-by chapter)

[Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly.](#)

[Joseph A. Pipa.](#) (Doesn't cover everything)

[Sinclair Ferguson.](#)

[John Gerstner.](#)

Course Schedule

Week	Dates	Discussion Topics	Secondary Reading	Primary Reading
1	1/8–1/14	General Introduction; WCF 1–3: Holy Scripture, God, Trinity, Divine Decree	WLC 2–14; Warfield, “ <u>The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture</u> ” (Cf. Works, VI, 155–257)	WCF 1–3
2	1/15–1/21	WCF 4–8: Creation, Providence, Fall, Covenant, Person and Work of Christ	WLC 15–57, 68; Arrowsmith, “ <u>On Creation</u> ,” 359–80; Leigh, “ <u>On Providence</u> ,” 369–78;	WCF 4–8

			Ward, " Covenant Theology and WCF "	
3	1/22–1/28	WCF 9–11: Free Will, Effectual Calling, Justification	WLC 57–60, 66–68, 70–71, 149; Van Dixhoorn, " Justification at Westminster " (1-hr. Lecture [Optional]); Leigh , 677–691, 709–25, 730–33; Jue, "Active Obedience..." (To be provided)	WCF 9–11
4	1/29–2/4	WCF 12–16: Adoption, Sanctification, Saving Faith, Repentance, Good Works	WLC 72–78, 153; McKelvey, "Eternal Justification ... Antinomianism," 223–62 (TBP); Leigh , 733–43, 748–50	WCF 12–16
5	2/5–2/11	WCF 17–19: Perserverance, Assurance, Law of God	WLC 79–81, 91–152; Cunningham, " Assurance ," 111–48; Winzer, " Law of God ,"	WCF 17–19
6	2/12–2/18	WCF 20–22: Christian Liberty, Religious Worship, Oaths and Vows	WLC 178–196; Directory of Public Worship ; Leigh , 1011–19.	WCF 20–22
7	2/19–2/25	WCF 23–26: Civil Magistrate, Marriage and Divorce, Church, Communion of Saints	WLC 61–66, 82–83, 86, 90; Gillespie, III Propositions ; Baxter, " On Divorce "; Leigh , 1134–41	WCF 23–26
8	2/26–3/3	WCF 27–29: Sacraments, Baptism, Lord's Supper	WLC 153–177; D. Patrick Ramsey, " On Baptismal Regeneration "; Marshall, " Sermon on Infant-Baptism "; WA, " On conditions to parake of LS "	WCF 27–29
9	3/4–3/10	WCF 30–31: Church Censures, Synods and Councils	Gillespie, " On Synods " and " On Censures "; Rutherford, On Keys of the Kingdom and Synods , Chs. 1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 12	WCF 30–31
10	3/11–3/17	WCF 32–33: Death and Resurrection, Final Judgment	WLC 84–90; Leigh, " Resurrection, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven " 1154–76	WCF 32–33