

- I. BETWEEN 1643-1647, THE ENGLISH PURITANS AT THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY COMPOSED AND ADOPTED THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH, ALONG WITH THE LARGER AND SHORTER CATECHISMS, WHICH (AMONG OTHER THINGS) OUTLINED A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND COMMUNION PARTICIPATION.
- **WLC 62** “The visible church is a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion, and of their children.”
 - **WLC 165** “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament... whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's.”
 - **WLC 173** “Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation.”
 - **WCF 26.2** “Saints by profession are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God... Which... is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.”
 - **WCF 14.2** “By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein... But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.
 - **WCF 18.4** “True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted... yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair.” [Jn. 21:15-19]
- II. IN 1648, THE NEW ENGLAND PURITANS, LED BY JOHN COTTON AND RICHARD MATTER, ADOPTED THE CAMBRIDGE PLATFORM,¹ AFFIRMING THE DOCTRINAL CONTENT OF THE WCF (minus *Am. Rev.* ~ Ch. 25, 30, 31), ALONG WITH A FORM OF CONGREGATIONALIST CHURCH GOVERNMENT AND DISCIPLINE WHICH PROVED HIGHLY INFLUENTIAL AMONG LATER CONGREGATIONALISTS, SUCH AS JOHN OWEN & THE SIGNERS OF THE SAVOY DECLARATION (1658).
- **CP 2.6** “A Congregational church is by the institution of Christ a part of the militant visible church, consisting of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant for the public worship of God and the mutual edification one of another in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus.”
 - **CP 3.1** “By saints, we understand, Such as not only have attained the knowledge of the principles of religion and are free from gross and open scandals, but also, together with the profession of their faith and repentance, walk in blameless obedience to the Word, so as that in charitable discretion they may be accounted saints by calling (1 Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2); though perhaps some or more of them be unsound and hypocrites inwardly: because the members of such particular churches are commonly by the Holy Ghost called saints and faithful brethren in Christ; and sundry churches have been reprov'd for receiving and suffering such persons to continue in fellowship among them, as have been offensive and scandalous: the name of God also by this means is blasphemed and the holy things of God defiled and profaned, the hearts of the godly grieved, and the wicked themselves hardened and helped forward to damnation; the example of such does endanger the sanctity of others. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. **3.2** The children of such, who are also holy.”
 - **CP 4.3** “This form [of a Visible Church] is the visible covenant, agreement or consent whereby they give up themselves unto the Lord to the observing of the ordinances of Christ together in the same society which is usually called the church covenant...**4.5** This form then being mutual covenant, it follows it is not faith in the heart... because that is invisible.”
 - **CP 12.1** “The doors of the churches of Christ upon earth do not by God's appointment stand so wide open that all sorts of people good or bad may freely enter therein at their pleasure; but such as are admitted thereto as members ought to be examined and tried first whether they are fit and meet to be received into church society or not. The eunuch of Ethiopia, before his admission, was examined by Philip whether he did believe on Jesus Christ with all his heart.”
 - **CP 12.2** “The things which are requisite to be found in all church members are repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38-42; 8:37). And therefore these are the things whereof men are to be examined at their admission into the church & which then they must profess and hold forth in such sort as may satisfy rational charity that the things are there indeed.”²
 - **CP 12.3** “The weakest measure of faith is to be accepted in those that desire to be admitted into the church: because weak Christians, if sincere, have the substance of that faith, repentance, and holiness which is required in church members (Rom.

¹ James Dennison, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, Vol. 4: 1600-1693 (pp. 369ff.)

² E. Morgan, *Visible Saints* (Kindle): “Outside the church in New England stood not only the mixed multitude of wicked Englishmen and heathen natives, but also the visibly good, who understood and believed the doctrines of Christianity and lived accordingly but who lacked the final experience of grace. The New England churches made no differentiation among these seemingly different men. Indeed the New England ministers devoted a good deal of time to showing that there was no difference in the eyes of God between the vilest sinner & the ‘civil’ man, who obeyed God's commands outwardly but did not love God in his heart. The only distinction among men in the eyes of God was between those who had saving faith & those who lacked it. Therefore the civil & the uncivil alike were kept outside God's church.”

14:1): and such have most need of the ordinances for their confirmation and growth in grace. The Lord Jesus would not quench the smoking flax nor break the bruised reed, but gather the tender lambs in His arms and carry them gently in His bosom (Matt. 12:20; Isa. 40:11). Such charity and tenderness is to be used, as the weakest Christian, if sincere, may not be excluded nor be discouraged. Severity of examination is to be avoided.”³

- **CP 12.7** “The like trial is to be required from such of the church as were born in the same or received their membership and were baptized in their infancy, or minority, by virtue of the covenant of their parents, when being grown up unto years of discretion, they shall desire to be made partakers of the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 7:6; 1 Cor. 11:27). Unto which, because holy things must no be given to the unworthy, therefore it is requisite that these as well as others should come to their trial and examination and manifest their faith and repentance by an open profession thereof before they are received to the Lord’s Supper, and otherwise not to be admitted there unto. Yet these church members that were so born or received in their childhood before they are capable of being made partakers of full communion have many privileges which others (not church members) have not. They are in covenant with God; have the seal thereof upon them, viz., baptism; and so if not regenerated, yet are in a more hopeful way of attaining regenerating grace and all the spiritual blessings both of the covenant and seal; they are also under church watch and consequently subject to the reprehensions, admonitions, and censures thereof for their healing and amendment, as need shall require.”⁴

III. SIX YEARS LATER (1654-55), QUESTIONS AROSE AS TO WHETHER THE CHILDREN OF BAPTIZED, NON-PROFESSING, NON-COMMUNING MEMBERS MAY RECEIVE BAPTISM, EVENTUALLY RESULTING IN THE BOSTON SYNOD (1662), WHICH AGREED TO PERMIT THE PRACTICE, LATER NICKNAMED BY ITS OPPONENTS, *THE HALFWAY COVENANT*.

- A. **CH. HODGE**: “Many were recognized as entitled to present their children for baptism, who were not prepared for admission to the Lord’s Supper. The controversy on this subject began in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1654, 1655. Several councils were called, which failed to produce unanimity.⁵ The question was referred to a Synod of divines to meet in Boston. The Synod met and sat two or three weeks. ‘As to the case of such baptized persons as, without being prepared to come to the Lord’s Supper, were of blameless character, and would own for themselves their baptismal obligations, it decided that they ought to be allowed to present their children for baptism. This assuming of baptismal obligations was called by opponents, *taking the Half-way Covenant*.” [ST: 3.567]
- B. **CH. HODGE**: “The Synod decided in favor of the following [seven] propositions: —
 1. They that, according to Scripture, are members of the visible Church, are the subjects of baptism.
 2. The members of the visible Church, according to Scripture, are confederate visible believers, in particular churches, and their infant seed, i.e. children in minority, whose next parents, one or both, are in covenant.
 3. The infant seed of confederate visible believers, are members of the same Church with their parents, and when grown up are personally under the watch, discipline, and government of that church.
 4. These adult persons are not, therefore, to be admitted to full communion, merely because they are, and continue members, without such further qualifications as the Word of God requireth thereunto.
 5. Church-members who were admitted in minority, understanding the doctrine of faith, and publicly professing their assent thereto, not scandalous in life, and solemnly owning the covenant [of baptism] before the Church, wherein they give up themselves and their children to the Lord, and subject themselves to the government of Christ in the Church, their children are to be baptized. *Propositions 6-7 omitted*. [ST: 567]

IV. PERHAPS AS EARLY AS 1677, THE REV. SOLOMON STODDARD, MINISTER AT NORTHAMPTON, CHANGED EVERYTHING.

- A. In the years leading up to Stoddard’s ordination at Northampton (1672), both he and his wife entertained doubts regarding his salvation, till one day, while administering communion, he experienced what he believed to be his conversion.⁶
- B. Between 1677 and 1720, Northampton’s communicant membership increased from 76 to nearly 500, following Stoddard’s decision to welcome Halfway Covenanters to the Lord’s Table, regardless of conversion (Murray, 87-89).

³ Wm. Perkins’ 10 Steps of Conversion (Common Elements of a Personal Testimony): (1) Hears the Word, often with affliction (2) Law reveals good/evil (3) Convicted of personal sin (4) Fears God’s wrath (5) Seriously considers gospel (6) Begins to trust Christ (7) Overcomes doubt/despair/unbelief (8) Rests on promises (9) Evangelical sorrow for sin (10) Seeks to obey God. [Works: 8.141]

⁴ Edmund Morgan, Visible Saints (Kindle): “The Puritans... [demanded] that when the child of a saint grew up he must demonstrate to the church that he was indeed saved. Until he did so, by the same kind of examination that adults seeking membership were subjected to, he should not be admitted to the Lord’s Supper. So said John Cotton, Richard Mather, and the synod of divines who between 1646 and 1648 drafted the exposition of Puritan beliefs and practices which is usually referred to as the Cambridge Platform.”

⁵ Britannica: “In 1657 a ministerial convention suggested that such children should be accepted for baptism and church membership, and in 1662 a synod of the churches accepted the practice, which in the 19th century came to be called the Half-Way Covenant.”

⁶ Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987) 79

- C. In loosening the standards for communion, Stoddard rejected the position of the Cambridge Platform, which limited communion to those who credibly professed faith and repentance, according to the charitable judgment of the church.⁷
- D. Stoddard openly acknowledged that, if his view were properly implemented, most communicants would be unconverted.⁸
- E. Stoddard taught his parishioners that their profession of faith did not involve a claim to have saving faith, meaning that the church gradually became filled with orthodox, outwardly moral communicants who did not even *profess* to be converted.⁹
- F. Stoddard's position was grounded in his belief that the Lord's Supper is a converting ordinance, by which unregenerate, doctrinally orthodox, outwardly moral churchgoers may be brought from death to life.¹⁰

V. **STODDARD WAS SUCCEEDED AT NORTHAMPTON BY HIS WELL-KNOWN GRANDSON, THE REV. JONATHAN EDWARDS, WHO INITIALLY TOLERATED STODDARD'S COMMUNION POLICY (1727-1747), BUT EVENTUALLY, UPON IMPLEMENTING A "CAMBRIDGE"-STYLE INTERVIEW PROCESS IN 1748, THE CONGREGATION — FILLED, NO DOUBT, WITH MANY UNCONVERTED HALFWAY COVENANTERS — VOTED HIM OUT OF OFFICE.**

*An Humble Inquiry into the Qualifications for Full Communion in the Visible Church of Christ (1649)*¹¹

- A. "The main question I would consider... is this; Whether, according to the rules of Christ, any ought to be admitted to the communion and privileges of members of the visible church of Christ in complete standing, but such as are in profession, and in the eye of the church's Christian judgment, godly or gracious persons?" [Works: 4.292-293]
- B. "The question is not, whether Christ has made converting grace or piety itself the condition or rule of his people's admitting any to the privileges of members in full communion with them... It is the credible profession and visibility of these things, that is the church's rule in this case... in the same manner as some kind of repentance is the qualification in one that has been suspended for being grossly scandalous, in order to his coming to the Lord's supper. [Works: 4.293]
- C. "...by Christian judgment I intend something further than a kind of mere negative charity, implying that we forbear to censure and condemn a man because we do not know but that he may be godly, and therefore forbear to proceed on the foot of such a censure or judgment in our treatment of him: as we would kindly entertain a stranger, not knowing but in so doing we entertain an angel or precious saint of God. But I mean a positive judgment, founded on some positive appearance, or visibly, some outward manifestations that ordinarily render the thing probable. There is a difference between suspending our judgment, or forbearing to condemn, or having some hope that possibly the thing may be so, and so hoping the best; and a positive judgment in favour of a person. For having some hope, only implies that a man is not in utter despair of a thing, though his prevailing opinion may be otherwise, or he may suspend his opinion. Though we cannot know a man believes that Jesus is the Messiah, yet we expect some positive manifestation of visibility of it, to be a ground of our charitable judgment: So I suppose the case is here." [Works: 4.295]
- D. "It is not my design... to affirm that all who are regularly admitted as members of the visible church in complete standing, ought to be believed to be godly or gracious persons when taken collectively, or considered in the gross, by the judgment of any person or society. This may not be, and yet each person taken singly may visibly be a gracious person to the eye of the judgment of Christians in general. These two are not the same thing, but vastly diverse; and the latter may be, and yet not

⁷ E. Morgan, *Visible Saints* (Kindle): "But the New England Puritans... felt obliged to deny baptism and communion to the unconverted. In their view both ordinances were seals of the covenant of grace which God extended to his elect. To permit an unbeliever to participate in them would be blasphemous. By this exclusion, however, the church deprived itself of two traditional means of bringing unregenerate men closer to God."

⁸ S. Stoddard, *Appeal to the Learned*, p. 16 (cited by J. Edwards, *An Humble Inquiry*, Works: 4.302): "Indeed by the rule that God has given for admissions, if it be carefully attended, more unconverted persons will be admitted than converted."

⁹ J. Edwards, *An Humble Inquiry, etc.* (Works: 4.306): "But in such churches, neither their publicly saying that they *avouch God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be their God, and that they give themselves up to him, and promise to obey all his commands, nor their coming to the Lord's supper, or to any other ordinances*, are taken for expressions or signs of anything belonging to the essence of Christian piety. But on the contrary, the public doctrine, principle, and custom in such churches establishes a diverse use of these words and signs. People are taught, that they may use them all, and not so much as make any pretence to the least degree of *sanctifying grace*; and this is the established custom. So they are used, and so they are understood... And hence they cease to be of the nature of any pretension to grace. And surely it is an absurdity to say, that men openly and solemnly profess grace, and yet do not so much as pretend to it."

¹⁰ J. Edwards, *An Humble Inquiry, etc.* (Works: 4.303): "Whereas, the doctrine taught [by Stoddard] is, that sanctifying grace is not a necessary qualification, and that there is no need that a person himself, or any other, should imagine he is a person so qualified. The assigned reason is, because it is no qualification requisite in itself; the ordinance of the Lord's supper is as proper for them that are not so qualified, as for those that are; it being according to the design of the institution a converting ordinance, and so an ordinance as much intended for the good of the unconverted, as of the converted; even as it is with the preaching of the gospel."

¹¹ Unabridged Title: "An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church"

the former... Hence... [it] by no means implies a pretence of any scheme that shall be effectual to keep all hypocrites out of the church, and for the establishing in that sense a pure church. [Works: 4.296-297]

- E. "When it is said, those who are admitted, etc., ought to be by profession godly or gracious persons; it is not meant, they should merely profess or say that they are converted or are gracious persons, that they know so, or think so; but that they profess the great things wherein Christian piety consists, vis. a supreme respect to God, faith in Christ, etc." [Works: 4.297]
- F. "And as to the ecclesiastical rule now in question, of admission to sacraments on a profession of godliness, when attended with requisite circumstances; although in particular instances it may be an occasion of some tender-hearted Christians abstaining, and some presumptuous sinners being admitted, yet that does not hinder but that a proper visibility of holiness to the eye of reason, or a probability of it in a judgment of rational Christian charity may this way be maintained as the proper qualification of candidates for admission... For it ought to be attended with an honest and sober character, and with evidences of good doctrinal knowledge, and with all proper, careful, and diligent instructions of a prudent pastor. And though the pastor is not to act as a searcher of the heart, or a lord of conscience in this affair, yet that hinders not but that he may and ought to inquire particularly into the experiences of the souls committed to his care and charge, that he may be under the best advantages to instruct and advise them, for their self-examination, to be helpers of their joy, and promoters of their salvation. However, finally, not any pretended extraordinary skill of his in discerning the heart, but the person's own serious profession concerning what he finds in his own soul, after he has been well instructed, must regulate the public conduct with respect to him, where there is no other external visible thing to contradict and over-rule it. And a serious profession of godliness, under these circumstances, carries in it a visibility to the eye of the church's rational and Christian judgment." [Works: 4.421]

VI. EDWARDS' POSITION IS ECHOED BY WILLIAM SYMINGTON IN HIS CLASSIC WORK, *MESSIAH THE PRINCE*.

- A. "The Lord Jesus Christ, in virtue of the Mediatorial dominion with which he is invested, prescribes the qualifications of the members of the church. He has a right to say who they are that shall enjoy the privileges of his kingdom. What the qualifications of church members should be, is a point of equal importance and difficulty. With respect to the invisible church, it cannot be questioned that actual regeneration and true faith in Christ are indispensable. Nor can it be doubted, even with respect to the visible church, that the possession of true and vital religion can alone qualify for fully promoting the objects of ecclesiastical communion. But, as this is a thing of which the office-bearers of the church are incompetent to judge, it would seem that the utmost they can require is a credible profession of true religion." [MTP, 101]
 1. **INTELLIGENT ORTHODOXY** "Of this [credible profession], intelligence and orthodoxy constitute essential elements... From all this it appears that soundness in the faith is a requisite qualification... The ignorant then, as well as the heterodox, are unfit for the communion of the church." [MTP, 101-102]
 2. **SUBMISSION TO CHRIST'S ORDINANCES** "Full submission to the ordinances of Christ is another qualification of the members of the church. The disciples of Christ are required to observe all things whatsoever he has commanded; and such as refuse to follow him in this cannot claim to be regarded as his disciples... It is not uncommon for persons who profess religion to live in the neglect of some one ordinance — family worship, or the Lord's Supper, for example — and yet they would fain be regarded as members of the church. How how can they?... A member of the church must be one who submits to all the laws and institutions of Christ's house, not... only what is agreeable or convenient." [MTP, 102]
 3. **APPARENT RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE** "Apparent religious experience is also indispensable. Apparent, we say, because of the reality man is incompetent to judge; appearances are all that is within the sphere of his cognizance. Whoever seeks admission to the fellowship of the Christian church, professes to have experienced something of the power of religion on his heart. And, although the rulers in the church may not be able to determine whether this profession be real, they are entitled to determine whether it be made, and to apply to it certain criteria of judgment. They may not be fit, in any case, to pronounce absolutely on the presence of true religion in the soul, nor, in every case, to decide on its absence; yet the appearances of its being present or absent may be in general so marked as to form a sufficient guide in receiving or refusing persons applying for admission. An individual who knows nothing of the nature of Christian experience, or of the marks by which it is distinguished, is, of course, inadmissible. Nor is it a bare pretension to religious experiences, or every plausible story of feelings and ecstasies, that can form a sufficient ground for admitting to ecclesiastical privileges. Credible evidences of the experimental power of religion are to be required, and nothing but what is rational, sober, consistent, and holy, can ever constitute credible evidence. [MTP, 102-103]
 4. **CONSISTENT BEHAVIOR** "To these qualifications must be added consistent behavior. The rule of judging is thus explicitly laid down by the Savior himself: 'By their fruits ye shall know them'... It is not enough that men 'repent and turn to God;' they must also 'do works meet for repentance.' They must be 'zealous for good works'... 'Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaking the truth in his heart' (Ps. 15:1-2)." [MTP, 103]
- B. "Such are the ingredients of a credible profession of true religion, the elements of a visible Christian character, the possession of which is necessary to qualify for admission to the church. And let it be carefully observed, that all the qualifications specified are essential. The profession in question does not exist where any one of them is wanting... We deny that the office bearers of religion have either the power or the right to judge men's hearts: but it were strange, indeed, if

they were not warranted to require that those who are professing to believe the Gospel shall give some signs that it is exerting its proper influence upon their hearts, and to inquire whether it has taught them to abjure self-righteousness, to renounce the practice of sin, and to live by faith on the Lord Jesus Christ; whether, in short, it has taught them to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the world.“ [MTP, 104]

VII. THE RPCNA, IN ADDITION TO ITS AFFIRMATION OF THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS, AGREES IN PRINCIPLE WITH THE VIEWS OF EDWARDS AND SYMINGTON IN ITS DIRECTORY FOR CHURCH GOVERNMENT.

- **DCG 1.4** “Candidates for communicant membership shall be examined by the session in constituted court. The examination shall seek to bring out the degree of the candidate’s knowledge of Divine truth, his personal sense of sin and need of salvation and his knowledge of and willing acceptance of the Covenant of Church Membership... No one should be admitted who is ignorance of the plan of salvation, or who gives no credible evidence of having been born again...” [Cf. Chart from Lect. 5]

	INWARD MARKS OF GRACE	VISIBLE FRUITS OF GRACE
DEFINITION	Biblical characteristics of a true Christian which may be discerned by the individual for the purpose of growing in personal assurance.	Biblical characteristics of a true Christian which may be discerned by church overseers for the purpose of identifying a credible profession, pursuant to communicant membership.
MANNER OF INQUIRY	Self-Examination of Heart and Life 2 Cor. 13:5	Ecclesiastical Evaluation of Profession and Life Mt. 7:15-20; Lk. 3:8-14
OBJECTIVE STANDARD	Scripture Alone 1 Jn. 5:13	Scripture Alone Mt. 16:18-19; Acts 2:47; 10:47
KIND OF CRITERIA	Inward Persuasion Heb. 10:22	Outward Credibility Mt. 13:28-30
MAXIMUM DEGREE OF CERTAINTY	Infallible, Full Assurance Col. 2:2; Heb. 6:11	Fallible, Charitable Confidence 1 Tim. 5:24-25; Heb. 6:9-10
RELEVANT STATUS OR CLASSIFICATION	Assurance of Salvation (2 Pet. 1:10) Eligibility for Communion (1 Cor. 11:28f)	Credible Profession of Faith (Jm. 2:14-19) Eligibility for Communion (Ezk. 44:7-9; 1 Cor. 5:9-13) Eligibility for Restoration (2 Cor. 2:5-11; 7:10-11)
WESTMINSTER STANDARDS	WCF 18.2 “This certainty is... an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidences of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God...”	WCF 25.2 “The visible church... consists of all those throughout the whole world that profess the true religion; & of their children. WLC 173 “Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of faith, and desire to come to the Lord’s supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation.”
ADD’L SCRIPTURE REFERENCES	Ps. 139:23-24; Rm. 8:13-17; Gal. 5:19-24	Ps. 15; Mt. 12:33; Lk. 6:45; Jn. 15:1-2