Westminster Seminary California
A New Old School

by W. Robert Godfrey and D. G. Hart
Americans look to California for a lot of things–movies, wine, and hamburger stands, but not for Calvinism. To be sure, California has made several remarkable contributions to American Protestantism–from the Azusa Street Revival and Aimee Semple McPherson to the Crystal Cathedral and Saddleback Church. But Americans–and the rest of the world for that matter–do not associate California with Reformed orthodoxy.

This book will challenge prevailing perceptions of California and Calvinism. The little seminary that started on a hill where orange groves previously grew has emerged as one of the most important voices in the world of Reformed seminaries and churches. Readers will learn that the success of Westminster Seminary in California was never easy. But they will also understand and appreciate that the causes for which the seminary has stood were the same as those that led J. Gresham Machen in 1929 to leave Princeton Theological Seminary and establish a new institution named Westminster.

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Available at The Bookstore at WSC: wscal.edu/anewoldschool/intro
Westminster Seminary California (hereafter, WSC) has had much to celebrate at the thirtieth anniversary of its founding. We have a beautiful, ten-acre campus with three buildings designed with care for the work of the seminary. We have a remarkable faculty with twelve full-time members. We have over 150 students and over 800 alumni serving the Lord throughout the world. Our story is an inspiring one of what God has done through a small number of committed, faithful people.

Still WSC recognizes that its inspiring story is a small part of a very big story. That recognition requires that we ask certain questions: Does WSC have enough history and enough significance to warrant a book on its history? Do we have enough distance from our work to be able to analyze its impact? The answer is yes, even if this history, like every history, must be in some ways provisional. Though we are indeed a small part of the big story of the history of American Christianity and the history of the American West, the story of WSC should be told because of its distinctive role and witness in that history. We represent a vital voice in the long development of American Protestantism. Our voice is arguably more needed and more important today than ever. The story we have to tell is not only inspiring, but it also is critically instructional for the life of the church in America.

This seminary was founded and has flourished through the work of many people, some of whom will not be mentioned at all, and others will be mentioned far less than their vital contribution would warrant. But this book cannot be a truly comprehensive history of WSC. Its focus is on the meaning and mission of the seminary and its role in the history of Christianity.

The character and commitment of WSC is for historic Calvinism—the Calvinism of the Reformed confessions. That Calvinism can be summarized in five points (perhaps not the five points you expect, although we believe in those, too):
1. **Biblical.** WSC is committed to:
   - the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible
   - the Christ-centered character of all the Bible
   - the Bible’s comprehensive regulation of faith and worship
   - the Bible’s authority in all it teaches about all callings and all of life

2. **Confessional.** WSC is committed to:
   - the teaching of the Westminster standards and the Three Forms of Unity as a faithful summary of the teaching of the Bible
   - the priorities of the confessions which we believe are the priorities of the Bible
   - the confessions as vitally relevant for the life of the church today
   - the confessions as faithful guides to ministers for the work of the ministry today

3. **Pious.** WSC is committed to:
   - cultivating piety in the hearts and lives of its students
   - encouraging growing faith in the promises of God and growing holiness of life in all Christians
   - teaching students to preach faithfully, expositing and applying the whole counsel of God
   - developing knowledge of and involvement in evangelism and missions

4. **Scholarly.** WSC is committed to:
   - careful and thorough engagement with the best scholarship
   - a scholarly development and defense of Reformed orthodoxy
   - encouraging students to love God with all their minds
   - preparing pastors for the church who have had an excellent scholarly education

5. **Passionate.** WSC is committed to:
   - being valiant for truth
   - pursuing our faith and work with zeal, not calm indifference
   - serving Christ, His Gospel, and His Church
WSC bears witness to that historic Calvinism out of a conviction that it is not just a frosting on the cake of some generic Christianity. Calvinism does not just provide optional extras for perfecting evangelicalism. At WSC we insist that Calvinism is an integrated, complete expression of Christianity of which no part is safely disposable. Calvinism is a coherent presentation of Christianity which, we believe, is older, profounder, more comprehensive, and more biblical than American evangelicalism. Calvinism is not a sub-set of evangelicalism, but a friendly rival with evangelicalism—as with Lutheranism and Pentecostalism—for the title of the most biblical form of Christianity.

One way to describe WSC’s conviction about Calvinism is to call it “Old School.” This label comes from debates within the Presbyterian Church USA in the nineteenth century. The confessional Presbyterians who were called Old School would have agreed with the claims for Calvinism stated above. They wanted to maintain the distinctive doctrines, worship, government, and life of Presbyterianism against a rising tide of homogenized evangelicalism. On the other side of the debate were the “New School” Presbyterians who insisted that they too were Calvinists, but thought that cooperation with evangelicals was more important than insisting on Reformed distinctives. The differences between these two schools became so serious that, in the 1830s, the Presbyterian Church split into two denominations.

The intellectual center of the Old School was Princeton Theological Seminary. It stood for strong, confessional Calvinism joined to excellent scholarship. It provided the best academic defense of the Bible and Christianity in nineteenth-century America. That scholarship was used by many kinds of conservative Protestants but Princeton remained strongly committed to Old School Calvinism.

When J. Gresham Machen and others at Princeton Seminary became convinced, in 1929, that the fundamental character of Princeton had been changed by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, they left to form a new Princeton that would stand where Princeton had always stood. That new seminary was Westminster Theological Seminary established in Philadelphia. The commitments of the new
seminary were made abundantly clear in the decision to name it after the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The heritage and convictions of old Princeton and of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia undergirded the founding of Westminster Seminary California in 1980. At the time of its founding the issues of the inerrancy of the Bible and of the nature of justification seemed to be the great issues before the conservative Protestant world. Conservative evangelicals and confessional Calvinists cooperated as co-combatants defending the historic Protestant commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible and justification by faith alone, but WSC was committed to much more than just these core evangelical doctrines. From the beginning WSC embraced full confessional Calvinism. All the faculty and Board of Trustees subscribed the Westminster Confession and Catechisms using the same form of subscription used at old Princeton. Over time, however, it would become clearer and clearer for WSC that remaining faithfully Calvinist would mean breaking with the emerging directions of American evangelicalism. WSC’s role in renewing and teaching Calvinism for the church in the changing religious world of America (and the world) is the message of this book.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Westminster Seminary California’s story is a small part of a very big story – the history of American Christianity and the history of the American West. Because of the seminary’s distinctive role and witness in history, this story is not only inspiring, but critically instructional for the life of the church in America.

PRAISE FOR WESTMINSTER SEMINARY CALIFORNIA

“Westminster Seminary California – an excellent seminary that enhances and preserves the Machen legacy will be a continued blessing to the Western United States and to the world.”
David W. Hall, senior pastor, Midway Presbyterian Church, Powder Springs, Georgia

“Westminster Seminary California is my favorite seminary in the world. You have served faithfully for 30 years and I pray you will continue in your steadfast dedication to the gospel of Christ for at least 300 years more.”
R. C. Sproul, President, Ligonier Ministries

“Westminster Seminary California is vital in our effort toward a modern Reformation.”
Michael S. Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California