

Truths We Confess

A SYSTEMATIC EXPOSITION

of the

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH



R. C. SPROUL

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Revised Edition



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FOREWORD

It is a privilege indeed to sound a fanfare for Dr. R.C. Sproul's *Truths We Confess*. Although it is a large volume written by a learned theologian, and although it expounds a document that is now almost four hundred years old—in the words of the angel, “Fear not!” For here you will find “good news of great joy . . . for all the people.” In these pages you will find a treasure trove of rich biblical instruction written in a style that is as accessible as it is pastoral.

There is a simple reason for this—it was written by R.C. Sproul.

Some four decades ago, a friend, recently returned from the United States, asked me if I had ever heard of R.C. Sproul, and he immediately added, “He is said to be the greatest communicator of Reformed theology in the world.” You do not easily forget a statement like that.

Not long afterward, on first meeting and hearing R.C., and then during the decades that followed, I was frequently to experience the key words in my friend's simple statement: “theology,” “Reformed,” “communicator.” All three were present in R.C.'s life and ministry to a very high degree and in an unusual unity.

Some individuals are marked by one or perhaps two of these characteristics; to be marked by all three is rare. But R.C.'s passion for the Holy One was expressed in his whole-souled commitment to and his remarkable ability to communicate the truth, power, and life-transforming wisdom of the theology that the Reformers and Puritans had mined from the pages of Scripture. He had sat at the feet of the master theologians for long hours and learned from them. But even more important than what he learned from Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards was his own encounter with the God of the Bible, who was their God, too. So, theology was never an armchair hobby for him. Instead, it was an essential ingredient in the flatten-you-on-your-face, life-changing, personal knowledge of the Lord who had revealed Himself to Moses and Isaiah, to Daniel and John.

In this sense, R.C. Sproul would not have been out of place in the gathering of ministers and others who assembled in Westminster Abbey in London in the early summer of 1643 in order to produce materials that would bring a greater sense of unity and cohesion to the Reformed churches in Europe. They began by revising the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles. They ended by producing a quite different series of documents altogether: two catechisms (which are conveniently printed as appendices to this volume), directories for church government and public worship, and their *pièce de résistance*, the Westminster Confession of Faith.

I rather suspect R.C. would have loved to have been part of the hard thinking, the vigorous debating, and the creating of bonds of fellowship after defending one's theological convictions that marked this several-years-long gathering. But more than that—as the labor that lies behind this volume indicates—he loved the product of their hard work. For these became for him, and for the ministry (Ligonier) and the church (Saint Andrew's Chapel) of which he was founder, the very stuff of life and ministry. Whether he was in the classroom as a professor of theology, in the pulpit as pastor of a large church, at conferences for ministers and laypeople, in front of the camera and behind the microphone, or writing books and creating a massive library of biblical and theological instruction, the Westminster Confession was the anatomy of everything he preached and taught. For that reason, few things will do you more good or set you on a safer path than to sit now at R.C.'s feet and read through his exposition of the great doctrines of the Christian faith.

I use the phrase “sit at his feet” deliberately, because you will soon realize that this is exactly what you feel you are doing. Indeed, if you ever had the privilege of hearing R.C. speak, I suspect that you, like me, will hear his voice virtually reading his own book to you. One of its characteristics is the sense it gives of having been written for just one person alone—for you. It may well be the next best thing to sitting on your own with R.C. and listening to him talk to you about the great doctrines of the Christian faith.

Truths We Confess is not an academic, technical discussion of an ancient document. Such works have their place and value. However, the

Westminster Confession of Faith was written not to be dissected by academics but to guide the church and to instruct Christians and help them grasp the structure of the gospel. It does for us what, sadly, is no longer done as a matter of course either in the church or in the educational system: it teaches us first principles, and it shows us how to think through everything in light of them. And the inclusion here of the two catechisms helps us see how these first principles are to be worked out in the context of a world that throws up all kinds of challenges to the Christian. Insofar as that is true, this is a book for every Christian home and family and one that will be especially valuable for younger Christians setting out on the way.

Two anecdotes will, I hope, underscore the worthwhileness of the commitment of time and energy you are making as you begin to read through these pages.

After a weekend away enjoyed by the young people in our church, I heard the following. On one of the evenings, when all the activities of the day were over, the youngsters were “chilling out” with one or two of the mothers who had accompanied them. They began to ask question after question—worldview questions, ethical questions, theological questions, Bible questions. One of the mothers patiently, succinctly, and impressively answered them all. Later, the second mother said to her: “That was amazing what you did there with the youngsters tonight! How did you know all these answers?” The first mother simply smiled and said, “Oh, they’re all basically in the Shorter Catechism.” She had grasped the doctrinal first principles and had learned to think about everything in light of them.

I feel confident that if you sit at R.C.’s feet in *Truths We Confess*, you will discover that you, too, understand the gospel more fully and are better equipped to live an intelligent and wise Christian life. Not only so, but whether you are a parent, a student, a neighbor, or a colleague at work, you will be all the more able to “make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” and to “do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

The second story may well make you smile—at least, it has that effect on me! Dr. Derek Thomas and I have enjoyed the privilege not only of being Ligonier Teaching Fellows together but of serving as ministers in

the same congregation. One weekend, R.C. honored us by coming to teach and preach in our church. At the Sunday morning services, he preached on the person of Christ. As the members of the congregation left through the various exit doors, one of them greeted Dr. Thomas with the words, “About time somebody was teaching some theology in this church!”

The comment might have hurt—after all, we were both professors of systematic theology as well as pastors in the congregation! What had we been doing? But instead, we laughed together. Truth to tell, we had been teaching doctrine to the congregation—but apparently, we did not have the R.C. touch. In the world of popular communication of the great truths of the faith, he was the undoubted master. Thousands of people around the world—indeed, hundreds of thousands—have been introduced to thoughtful Christianity through him and have come to appreciate the Godness of God the Holy One through his ministry.

As you will discover in these pages, like all systematic theologians, R.C. loved little Latin phrases. Older writers used to distinguish between what they called *theologia viatorum* and *theologia gloriae*—the theology we understand as pilgrims on the way, and the theology we will understand only when we are in glory. R.C. went to be with the Lord on December 14, 2017, and now enjoys the *theologia gloriae*. But thankfully, he has left behind for our benefit and blessing this marvelous compendium of the *theologia viatorum*. And since we are still pilgrims on the way, it is exactly what we need. So, in words once famously heard by Augustine of Hippo, a theologian R.C. ranked among the greatest, *Tolle lege*—Take up this book, and read it!

—DR. SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON
Ligonier Ministries Teaching Fellow
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PREFACE

For centuries, the church of Jesus Christ has found it necessary to confess its faith before the watching world. Confessions of our faith have come in the forms of brief creedal statements and larger, more comprehensive confessional documents. From the early days of the Apostles' Creed—which includes the opening statement “I believe,” from the Latin *credo*—the church has shown its obedience to the command of our Lord not only to believe in our hearts but also to profess with our lips what we believe. Christianity is a religion with content. Its truths are central to the life and practice of the church.

It is necessary in every generation for the church to clarify its beliefs against constant attacks and distortions of her body of truth. Christianity is sometimes called a faith, the “Christian faith.” In using the term *faith*, what is in view is the body of truths that the church affirms and puts her trust in and by which the content of Christianity is defined.

One of the most important confessions of faith ever penned, particularly in the English-speaking world, is the Westminster Confession of Faith. By the confession's own statements, no confession written by uninspired authors is to be taken as having supreme authority over the believer. Confessions cannot bind the conscience in the manner that the Word of God can and does. At the same time, though human confessions and creeds are penned by fallible people without the benefit of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the profound level of theological and biblical precision manifest in the Westminster Confession of Faith is awe-inspiring.

The Westminster Confession is the most precise and accurate summary of the content of biblical Christianity ever set forth in a creedal form. Creeds such as the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Scots Confession should be highly regarded, but no historic confession surpasses in eloquence, grandeur, and theological accuracy the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Though by no means a political document, the confession was forged in the midst of political turmoil in England in the seventeenth century. England's Reformation did not have the most auspicious beginning, perhaps sparked less by theological conviction and more by Henry VIII's desire for a male heir and thus his split with the Roman Catholic Church over his freedom to divorce. From there, things only got worse, as a series of monarchs saw England flip from Protestant to Catholic and back again. Eventually, this gave rise to an unhappy medium, which in turn sparked the rise of the Puritan movement. The Puritans were committed Protestants who wanted to see the church purged of any influence from the Roman Catholic Church.

During the English Civil War, as King Charles I's tenuous grip on the English throne slipped, he called the Long Parliament, which in turn called the Westminster Assembly. Originally charged with revising the Thirty-Nine Articles, the confession of the Church of England, the assembly soon shifted focus to put together a whole new confession.

The end result was a well-balanced consensus document. There were heated debates on sundry issues, most notably church government. There was, however, a level of clarity and precision that the pastors and theologians who composed the document—known as divines—could be thankful for.

This exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith is not written in a technical, academic way but is designed to be accessible to the lay reader. It is my hope that as people study the articles set forth in this confession, they will come to a deeper understanding of and greater love for the doctrines of grace so ably set forth by the Westminster divines. It is my prayer that the confession will drive us constantly to the Scriptures themselves for the confirmation of what is hereby professed.

Of the Holy Scripture

1. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.
2. Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these:

Of the Old Testament:

Genesis	II Chronicles	Daniel
Exodus	Ezra	Hosea
Leviticus	Nehemiah	Joel
Numbers	Esther	Amos
Deuteronomy	Job	Obadiah
Joshua	Psalms	Jonah
Judges	Proverbs	Micah

4 • TRUTHS WE CONFESS

Ruth	Ecclesiastes	Nahum
I Samuel	The Song of Songs	Habakkuk
II Samuel	Isaiah	Zephaniah
I Kings	Jeremiah	Haggai
II Kings	Lamentations	Zechariah
I Chronicles	Ezekiel	Malachi

Of the New Testament:

The Gospels	Galatians	The Epistle
according to	Ephesians	of James
Matthew	Philippians	The first and
Mark	Colossians	second Epistles
Luke	Thessalonians I	of Peter
John	Thessalonians II	The first, second,
The Acts of the	to Timothy I	and third Epistles
Apostles	to Timothy II	of John
Paul's Epistles	to Titus	The Epistle
to the Romans	to Philemon	of Jude
Corinthians I	The Epistle to	The Revelation
Corinthians II	the Hebrews	of John

All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.

3. The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.
4. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.
5. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the

consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

6. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.
7. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.
8. The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that,

the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.

9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.
 10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.
-

The Westminster Confession of Faith is one of the most important Protestant confessions, for it gave substantial definition to Reformed theology in the seventeenth century. It is often compared to similar confessions of faith, such as the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Scots Confession, and the Thirty-Nine Articles.

There was an internal debate as to where to begin a study of Reformed theology: with the doctrine of God or with the doctrine of Scripture. It is significant that the Westminster divines began their confessional statement with sacred Scripture. They were concerned about two principles. One, which is at the very heart of Christianity, is the concept of divine revelation. Christianity is a revealed religion, constructed not on the basis of speculative philosophy but in response to what God Himself has made manifest. Second is the principle of *sola Scriptura*, developed by the Reformers. It acknowledges that the final authority in all matters of theology and in all controversies of faith and life is not the decrees or traditions of the church but sacred Scripture itself. The Westminster Confession affirms the central importance and sufficiency of Scripture—a Reformational concept.

1. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to

give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

The first sentence distinguishes between the divine revelation that is sufficient for salvation and the divine revelation that is not sufficient for salvation. The **light of nature** refers to Paul's teaching about general revelation (Rom. 1). Classic Reformed theology distinguishes between general (or natural) revelation and special revelation.

God's general revelation is His revelation of Himself principally through nature and also through history, through the ministry of His providence to His people, and through His works of creation. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). Paul teaches that all men, by nature, know something of the existence, character, power, and deity of God, because God so clearly manifests Himself in general revelation (Rom. 1:18–20).

God's general revelation can be either "immediate" or "mediate." *Immediate* means "direct, without any medium or intervening agency." Paul talks about God's revealing His law inwardly through the human heart, so that every person is born with a conscience (Rom. 2:14–15). God plants a sense of Himself immediately in the soul of His creatures. John Calvin calls this the *sensus divinitatis*, "the sense of the divine." As fallen creatures, we suppress the knowledge of right and wrong that God plants within us. But try as we may, we can never extinguish it. It is still present in the soul. That is immediate general revelation.

Mediate general revelation has to do with the way in which God manifests Himself through creation itself. Nature points beyond itself to its Maker and Creator. Paul speaks of mediate revelation when he says that the invisible things of God, even His eternal power and divine nature, are

understood through the created order. That knowledge also is squelched, repressed, and unacknowledged by fallen creatures. The indictment of the whole human race is that while we know God by virtue of general revelation, we refuse to honor Him as God and are not grateful to Him (Rom. 1:20–21).

It is no wonder that the Westminster divines wrestled over whether to begin the confession with the doctrine of revelation or with the doctrine of God—the two are intimately tied together. God is not only a God who exists but also a God who speaks. Communication is essential to His being. This is why, in turn, natural revelation quickly turns to natural theology. God has revealed through nature not only His law, by placing that law in our hearts, but also His nature. Natural theology encompasses all that is knowable about God apart from special revelation. Paul describes this as “his eternal power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20). We not only can but do know that the creation requires a Creator and that the Creator must be sovereign over His creation, both in terms of His authority and His power.

General revelation, unlike special revelation, comes to us through nature and is called general for two reasons. First, the audience is general; God gives knowledge of Himself universally, so that every human has this revelation, which is built into nature. Second, the content of general revelation gives us a knowledge of God in general. It reveals that He is eternal; it reveals His power, deity, and holiness. General revelation, however, does not disclose God’s way of salvation. The stars do not reveal the ministry of Christ. In fact, general revelation reveals just enough knowledge of God to damn us, to render us without excuse. Christ came into a world that was already under the judgment of God because we had already rejected the Father. Revelation is general, then, in terms of both audience and content. Paul in Romans 1 explains that through creation we know enough about God and about ourselves to stand condemned before God. The word *general* here means that all men know this. The *revelation* includes the revelation of the wrath of God against us. Because of the depth of our sin, our response to the revelation of God is not gratitude and repentance but rebellion and suppression.

The term *special revelation* refers to the revelation of God inscripturated

in the Bible. It is special in the same ways that general revelation is general: with respect to audience and content. There have been and still are many people who have never heard the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, or even Jesus. The Word of God has not yet gone everywhere. People are exposed to special revelation when someone tells it to them or when they read it in Scripture. The term *special* also describes the content of the revelation, for it opens up to us God's plan of salvation, specifically concerning the person and work of Christ.

Clearly in view in chapter 1 of the confession is the distinction between general and special revelation and between sufficiency and insufficiency in revelation. General revelation is not sufficient to give us the knowledge necessary for salvation; special revelation is sufficient for that purpose.

Some people attack the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture by pointing out that Scripture does not teach all that we need to know about everything. For example, we know nothing about the body's circulatory system from the Bible. But that is not what the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture means. This doctrine means that Scripture reveals what is necessary to know for salvation. It is not necessary to know about the circulatory system in order to understand what is needed to be saved, but we do need to know the gospel that is revealed in Scripture.

Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing. God, who "at many times and in many ways" revealed Himself "long ago," has now in these last days given us the culmination of His revelation in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–2). The confession echoes the teaching of Scripture that God has, in various ways, revealed Himself in the past. But now, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, God has committed His revelation wholly unto writing. In the early days of the Apostolic church,

the life and teachings of Christ had not yet been set down in writing. This information was transmitted orally from person to person. But it pleased God, in His providence, to have that special revelation inscripturated, or put into written form. For this redemptive purpose we have the Bible.

Which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased. Scripture is necessary for our comfort and strength. Having been written in final form, it supersedes the various ways in which God revealed Himself in former days. God formerly revealed Himself through the Urim and Thummim, through the prophets, through dreams, and in other ways. The confession points out that the culmination of revelation has been preserved for us in Holy Scripture, and that God's special revelation, having been inscripturated, no longer continues.

2. Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these:

Of the Old Testament:

Genesis	II Chronicles	Daniel
Exodus	Ezra	Hosea
Leviticus	Nehemiah	Joel
Numbers	Esther	Amos
Deuteronomy	Job	Obadiah
Joshua	Psalms	Jonah
Judges	Proverbs	Micah
Ruth	Ecclesiastes	Nahum
I Samuel	The Song of Songs	Habakkuk
II Samuel	Isaiah	Zephaniah
I Kings	Jeremiah	Haggai
II Kings	Lamentations	Zechariah
I Chronicles	Ezekiel	Malachi

Of the New Testament:

The Gospels	Galatians	The Epistle
according to	Ephesians	of James
Matthew	Philippians	The first and
Mark	Colossians	second Epistles
Luke	Thessalonians I	of Peter
John	Thessalonians II	The first, second,
The Acts of the	to Timothy I	and third Epistles
Apostles	to Timothy II	of John
Paul's Epistles	to Titus	The Epistle
to the Romans	to Philemon	of Jude
Corinthians I	The Epistle to	The Revelation
Corinthians II	the Hebrews	of John

All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.

An ongoing controversy exists concerning which books should be included in the canon of Scripture, especially the books known as the Apocrypha. The apocryphal books were written primarily during the intertestamental period, between the end of the Old Testament canon (the book of Malachi) and the opening of the New Testament. The Roman Catholic Church holds to the canonical status of the Apocrypha, while for the most part Protestant bodies do not. These books are recognized as interesting historical sources of a secondary level but lacking the authority of Scripture itself.

There is also debate over the extent of the Jewish canon. The New Testament refers back to the Old Testament. Paul wrote to Timothy, for example, that “all Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). Paul was referring to a body of literature that was well known to Timothy and every pious Jew. What were the sacred Scriptures of the Jews?

The great library of Alexandria, where Philo and others worked, was a cultural center for Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews. The canon of the Alexandrian Jews included the Apocrypha. Historical evidence indicates that the Palestinian canon, used by the Jews in Israel, did not contain the

Apocrypha. From the Reformers' perspective, the original Jewish canon was the Palestinian canon, not the Alexandrian canon. Interestingly enough, in the later twentieth century, some evidence emerged to indicate that even among the Alexandrian Jews the Apocrypha was accorded only deuterocanonical (secondary-level) status. More and more, the evidence seems to confirm the Protestant conclusion that the original books of sacred Scripture were the sixty-six books currently in the Protestant Bible. Section 2 ends with this comprehensive statement: **All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.**

3. The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.

Although the Apocrypha are not part of the canon of the Scripture, these books need not be completely ignored or discarded. We do not throw away the letters of Clement, Ignatius, or other church fathers, which are of historical interest. The confession makes the point only that the books of the Apocrypha are not inspired and therefore do not belong in the canon.

The idea of inspiration finds its root in the teaching of the Apostle Paul, who wrote, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). The King James and other versions of the Bible say the Bible is "given by inspiration," which translates the Greek word *theopneustos*—a combination of *theos*, meaning "God," and *pneō*, meaning "to breathe, blow"—which literally means "God-breathed." Paul is saying that sacred Scripture is God-breathed.

In both Roman Catholic and Protestant circles, the theory of inspiration is that, though the documents of sacred Scripture were written by human authors, they were not merely recording their own opinions or recollections. They were performing their task as agents of revelation under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit. The human authors were given the ability to write just what God wanted to be written. The authority of their words was not their own but God's authority. We do not know how the Holy Spirit inspired them. We do know that the writers were not

reduced to automatons, with God moving their hands. The books of the Bible are clearly written in different styles, with different vocabularies and grammatical structures. When we contrast the writings of Paul with those of John or Peter or Jeremiah, we see their different styles. God obviously worked through their individual styles and mannerisms. The doctrine of inspiration, as mysterious as it is, declares that while humans were writing, God the Holy Spirit ensured that what they wrote was without error and was actually *verbum Dei*, the Word of God itself.

When Paul says that all Scripture is inspired, or God-breathed, he is technically saying that Scripture is breathed out of the mouth of God, where it originates. The term *breathing in* refers to the secret operation of the Holy Spirit by which He produces the Word of God from the word of men, yet without human invention. The accent is on its origin and consequently its authority. All Scripture, Paul says, is breathed out by God, and is nothing less than the Word of God, which has binding authority upon us.

4. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

Here we read a phrase that is important to Protestantism: **the authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed.** The confession asserts that the Bible's authority is so strong, so supreme, that it imposes on us a moral obligation to believe it. If we do not believe it, we have sinned. It is not so much an intellectual as a moral issue.

If the Lord God Almighty opens His mouth, there is no room for debate and no excuse for unbelief. It is the Word of God, and everyone is duty-bound to submit to its authority.

Satan beguiled Eve with the question, "Did God actually say . . . ?" (Gen. 3:1), calling God's authority into question. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, all three temptations centered on whether Christ would trust and live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:1–11). Throughout church history, the supreme attack of the

world, the flesh, and the devil against godliness has been an attack on the authority of God's Word. Fierce assaults on the authority of Scripture, which came out of the Enlightenment, made their way into the universities and seminaries. They also came from within the church, in the name of biblical criticism or higher criticism.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Abraham Kuyper, prime minister of the Netherlands and founder of the Free University of Amsterdam, observed that biblical criticism had become biblical vandalism. No treasure has been more subject to malicious attack than Scripture itself.

Section 4 is a concise and theologically precise statement. The Westminster divines used the word *received* purposely. In the controversy with the Roman Catholic Church, then and now, the question is this: Does final authority reside in the church or in the Bible? This is what *sola Scriptura* was all about in the sixteenth century. Rome strongly contended that the Bible gets its authority from the church. Martin Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers debated this regularly in the sixteenth century. The Westminster divines studied the early centuries of church history to arrive at the word *received*.

When the early church settled on the books of the canon, it spoke of receiving these books as canonical. They did not declare the books of the Bible to be the books of the Bible, as if the Bible's authority were dependent on them. They said *recipimus*, Latin for "we receive." The church fathers were humbly recognizing the authority of these books, not presuming to give them authority, when they stated, "We receive these Apostolic writings as the sacred Scriptures, as the authoritative Word of God." The church did not need to declare this truth in order for it to be so. The church no more gave the Bible its authority than the individual gives Christ His authority by embracing Him as Lord. He is Lord—we are simply called to recognize it. The authority of Scripture does not depend on the testimony of any man or of the church; its authority depends and rests wholly on God, the supreme author of the Bible. Scripture should be received, not so that it can become the Word of God, but because it already is the Word of God.

This wording and principle proved to be prophetic with the rise of Neoorthodoxy in the twentieth century. Neoorthodox theology argues

not that the Bible is the Word of God (accusing the historical view of “bibliolatry”) but that as we encounter the Bible, it “becomes” the Word of God. It is only in this existential encounter that God speaks, according to this view. The Bible is not itself revelation but is only a witness to revelation. The divines affirmed the very opposite—that the Bible is God’s Word from beginning to end, whatever we may do with it.

5. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heaviness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

This section introduces a concept that was central to the teaching of John Calvin. The ideas in his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are brought almost verbatim into the Westminster Confession at this point. This concept is what we call the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Previously, the confession stated that Scripture’s authority comes from God, not from any man or from the church. Section 5 now acknowledges that, though Scripture does not receive its authority from the church, we are to respect the testimony and teaching of the church. The Reformers, though denying tradition as a source of truth equal to the Scriptures, nevertheless esteemed the teaching office of the church through the ages. Apart from the Bible, the source most quoted by Calvin was Augustine. Luther also quoted Augustine frequently, as well as other church fathers. Church councils and gifted teachers have had great insight and are to be taken seriously.

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. In our day and age, even within the church, we often find anything but a high view of sacred

Scripture. Throughout church history, however, virtually every confession of faith, whether Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or something else, has strongly affirmed Scripture's divine authority. The confession says that the testimony of the church may influence us to hold Scripture in high esteem.

In his *Institutes*, Calvin wrote of the internal indicators or evidence that the Bible is the word of God, sometimes called the *autopistae*, "the self-authentication of Scripture." When one immerses oneself in sacred Scripture, one encounters certain ideas that are most impressive and that bear witness to its divine source. Calvin called this the *indicia*, "the evidences." They ought to be sufficient to prove to every human being that the Bible is the Word of God. Human reason is such, however, that these indicators or internal evidences do not give people a full measure of confidence that the Bible is the Word of God.

Calvin then distinguished between proof and persuasion. The proof is objective; the evidence leaves no room for reasonable doubt. But people may refuse to accept that evidence because they have a strong bias against what it affirms. Scripture's portrait of the fallen character of the human race reveals that, by nature, we do not want God in our thinking, preferring darkness to light. Paul explains in Romans 1 that because we have rejected His revelation, God has given us over to reprobate minds, darkened by unbelief.

The fall is so deep, and its impact on the mind is so strong, that the best reasoning one human can offer for the Bible's truth will not convince another, no matter how sound, valid, and compelling it may be. The confession lists various aspects of the internal evidence of Scripture.

And the heavenliness of the matter. C.S. Lewis, who immersed himself in the great literature of Western civilization, once observed that he could not read Scripture without recognizing a transcendent quality missing from all other literature. I was trained in philosophy to take nothing for granted and to analyze critically the affirmations and assertions in every document. But I found when reading Scripture that in a very real sense I, rather than the text, was the object of criticism. The Bible was criticizing me more than I was able to criticize it. One is confronted with the heavenliness of the matter.

Thomas Watson gets at the divine quality of the Bible in His *Body of Divinity*, where he writes:

The Scripture appears to be the Word of God, by the matter contained in it. The mystery of Scripture is so abstruse and profound that no man or angel could have known it, had it not been divinely revealed. That eternity should be born; that He who thunders in the heavens should cry in the cradle; that He who rules the stars should suck the breasts; that the Prince of Life should die; that the Lord of Glory should be put to shame; that sin should be punished to the full, yet pardoned to the full; who could ever have conceived of such a mystery, had not the Scripture revealed it to us? So, for the doctrine of the resurrection; that the same body which is crumbled into a thousand pieces, should rise *idem numero*, the same individual body, else it were a creation, not a resurrection. How could such a sacred riddle, above all human disquisition, be known, had not the Scripture made a discovery of it? As the matter of Scripture is so full of goodness, justice and sanctity, that it could be breathed from none but God; so the holiness of it shows it to be of God.

The efficacy of the doctrine. This phrase reminds us of Paul's statement to Timothy that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The doctrine found in Scripture is effective and powerful. The Apostle Paul further writes that the power is of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16) and is not found in the eloquence or knowledge of the preacher. The power of God for salvation is in the message. The doctrine of the gospel has impact and is efficient and effective; thus, we speak of the efficacy of the doctrine.

The majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts. Is that not an interesting affirmation to make in the seventeenth century? When the Enlightenment philosophers laid an ax to the root of the tree of biblical authority, they intended to chop down all the alleged inconsistencies and contradictions. Even in light of the higher criticism to which I was exposed in my academic background, I have been most impressed by

Scripture's incredible symmetry. The most infinitesimal details in Jeremiah and Ezekiel fit together so perfectly with what was proclaimed centuries later by James, John, and Paul. This harmony of Scripture is a beautiful melding and merging together in a unified proclamation of truth. This confession, like other Protestant and Roman Catholic confessions, cites the unity and coherence of Scripture (the consent of all the parts) as a testimony to its divine origin.

The scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God. The arguments (indicators, internal evidences) do not just hint at the divine origin of Scripture but abundantly affirm it. Calvin would say that the *indicia*, the evidence, is so abundant that it should stop the mouth of every skeptic. But this phrase from the confession ends with a colon.

Yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts. This is the doctrine of the internal testimony. A person will not be fully persuaded or assured that the Bible is the Word of God unless and until God the Holy Spirit does a work in his heart, which is called the internal testimony of the Spirit.

This could sound like a defense of Scripture that is sheer subjectivism. If an appeal for truth is based on some inner light such as "The Holy Spirit spoke to me" or "I had this intense feeling," this cannot be tested objectively and either verified or falsified. The unspoken argument for flight into subjectivism is "It's true because I believe it." This formula assumes that anything I believe must, in fact, be the truth. It is in effect a claim of personal infallibility. This is not what the doctrine of internal testimony teaches.

The Spirit's internal testimony does not give the believer private, esoteric knowledge or information that is unavailable to anyone else. In fact, this testimony communicates no new content. Rather, the Holy Spirit works on our obstinate will to overcome our natural antipathy toward the Word of God. In simple terms, the Spirit melts our hearts so that we

are willing to surrender to the objective truth that is there. Calvin used the word *acquiesce*, “to submit or surrender to.” Calvin said that the Spirit causes us to acquiesce in the *indicia*.

In a watershed sermon early in his ministry called “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” Jonathan Edwards preached about the Spirit’s work of changing the obstinate, recalcitrant hearts of sinners by inwardly changing the disposition of their souls. That is what the confession is talking about here: God melts our hearts and makes us fully persuaded and assured of Scripture’s infallible truth and divine authority.

Is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts. The Reformers strongly believed in the importance of the ministry and operation of God the Holy Spirit. Calvin was called the theologian of the Holy Spirit. Yet the Reformers were clearly distinct from the radical spiritualists, who sought private revelations from God beyond the content of sacred Scripture. Around us today are people claiming new revelation, which may or may not conform to the Word of God. I have encountered people who took actions that were clearly opposed to the teaching of Scripture. They claimed that when they prayed about it, the Lord told them it was fine. The Holy Spirit does not speak with a forked tongue. He never grants us the right to disobey what His inspired Scriptures instruct us regarding our duty. The Spirit works with and through the Word, never apart from or against it.

6. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

We see here an affirmation of the sufficiency of Scripture with respect to the whole counsel of God, a phrase that is sometimes used in the church in a cavalier manner. Pastors are enjoined to preach the whole counsel of God—not just the part they like, not just what is comfortable or what the people in the pew want to hear, but the whole counsel of God. In preaching through a book of the Bible, staying with the text, a pastor has to preach whatever comes next. Sometimes I look at what’s next and think, “Oh, my, this is a church-emptier.”

One text in John, for example, unavoidably, plainly, and clearly teaches the doctrine of definite atonement, which is probably the single most unpopular concept of historic Reformed theology. This text teaches that Christ died specifically for the elect and only for the elect. From all eternity, God had a plan to save some, and to accomplish that plan He sent His Son into the world. God gave to His Son a certain number of people, and Christ laid down His life for them. The atonement is efficacious only for those whom the Father gives to the Son. That text (John 6:35–40) is very unpopular because contemporary evangelicalism assumes that Christ died for everyone’s sins. The text teaches that Christ died only for believers, and the only ones who believe are the elect. Atonement was not made for the sins of unbelievers. Had their sins been atoned for, God would be unjust to punish them. This is a very difficult doctrine, one over which people often stumble. A preacher’s mandate, however, is to be faithful to the text and to the whole counsel of God. Since this text is part of the whole counsel of God, there is no choice but to proclaim it.

Concerning all things necessary for his own glory. That is the *solī Deo gloria* of the Reformation. What we do will be measured by how faithfully we have manifested the glory of God and exalted him.

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture. Some believe that logic is the enemy of Christianity, an intrusion into spiritual things derived from Aristotle and Greek thinking. In my experience, however, the vast majority of errors in biblical interpretation occur because a person is not using logic properly, not deducing by

good and necessary consequence. The whole counsel of God is known not only by what Scripture teaches explicitly but also by what it teaches implicitly, which can be learned by clear and necessary deduction. If God calls us to honor our fathers and mothers, does He not also call us, by good and necessary consequence, not to dishonor them? When the law prohibits something, it implicitly, by good and necessary consequence, commands the opposite.

The divines were careful to affirm not that we are free to add whatever we think *might* be a consequence of what the Scripture says but only that which is necessary. Every truth brings with it implications that may follow, and inferences that must follow. It is vital that we remember that distinction and only hold one another to that which *must* follow.

The Reformers knew that once the church's authority as the supreme interpreter of the Bible was set aside in favor of the individual's right to "private interpretation," a floodgate would be opened. It is not enough simply to agree that the Bible is the supreme authority. One must determine what that authority teaches and requires. In its fourth session, the Council of Trent decided that no man has the right to distort the Scriptures by private interpretation. With the right and privilege of private interpretation always comes the burden of responsibility for correct interpretation. For this reason, the Westminster Confession says that all deductions are to be by good and necessary consequence. Interpretations can be tested objectively to determine whether they comply with what the Bible actually teaches.

Unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. The canon of Scripture is closed in the sense that it cannot be amplified or added to by church tradition or private revelation. We have inscripturated divine revelation to govern the life of the Christian and the church.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word. Some charismatics believe that they receive new revelation—revelation not found in Scripture. Reformed theology declares that there is no new revelation. This is not to deny new activity by the Holy Spirit, for there is a sharp distinction between revelation and

illumination. In revelation, the Spirit works to reveal divine content as is found in the Bible. Therefore, when Paul wrote Romans, it was inscripturated divine revelation.

How do we penetrate the meaning of Scripture? Paul wrote:

But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Cor. 2:9–11)

Paul is speaking here not only of revelation but also of illumination. The Holy Spirit is not a seeker. When Paul uses the metaphor of the Spirit’s searching, he means not that the Spirit is searching the truth of God for Himself but that the Spirit is putting a searchlight on the Word of God for us.

As we read and study Scripture, the Spirit opens our eyes, not to add anything to what is already there, but to clarify what is there and to apply it to our lives. Reformed theology does not deny the importance of divine illumination, in which the Spirit casts light on the content that He revealed through Apostles and prophets. He helps our infirmities, counteracts our biases and fallenness, and convinces us of the truth through His work of illumination. We acknowledge the illumination of the Spirit to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. This qualifying section elucidates the previous sentence. The confession acknowledges another source of revelation, which we touched on in section 1: general revelation, God’s revelation of Himself in and through nature.

Is general revelation infallible? Some reply that infallibility belongs only to special revelation, the Bible, because it is revelation from God, who cannot fail or err. If His special revelation is infallible because He is infallible, however, would it not follow that His general revelation is also infallible? The church of all ages has answered yes. We tend to think that, while special revelation is infallible, general revelation in nature is not, so science and intellectual inquiry may be mistaken. Scientists may err when they interpret the data of nature, but their imperfect interpretations do not vitiate general revelation itself. Just as theologians can distort biblical revelation, so scientists can distort general revelation. We sometimes assume that the theologian is right and the scientist is wrong, or the converse. The confession acknowledges that the church learns things not only from the Bible but also from nature: there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence.

Christian prudence refers to wisdom. For example, in some denominations, when deliberations take place at the session, presbytery, or general assembly, they follow Robert's Rules of Order. These rules for discussion, debate, and hearings are not found in the Bible, but they are broadly used in church life because they have stood the test of time. This is an example of general, natural law that has emerged. We talk about the *jus gentium*, the "law of nations." Virtually every nation in the world follows certain bedrock principles of ethics, to which the church also pays attention. We call this the *lex naturalis*, the "natural law," which, though not specifically spelled out in Scripture, may be examined and known from a study of the church's corporate activity throughout history. This may benefit church life because it reflects Christian prudence. We might subsume this idea under the concept of tradition. From a biblical perspective, human tradition must never be elevated to a position above the law of God, supplanting that law or binding the consciences of people. But tradition can be a valuable purveyor of the church's cumulative wisdom. Even though tradition is not infallible, we would be foolish to ignore this corporate wisdom. Paul enjoined the Thessalonians not to forget the apostolic tradition they

had received (2 Thess. 2:15). The “traditions” we have received are not the same as the Bible. But they can be, and in fact are, important while subsidiary. Whether it is the Westminster Confession or the Apostles’ Creed, we need to be slow to jettison that which has been handed down to us. Is it possible the Apostles’ Creed disagrees with the Bible? Yes. Is it likely? No.

7. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

The propriety of private interpretation was hotly debated during the sixteenth century. The Roman Catholic Church had taken the position (and reinforced it in the fourth session of the Council of Trent) that scriptural interpretation belongs to the teaching office of the church, and that no one has the right to interpret Scripture in a way contrary to the interpretation of Holy Mother Church. Luther, however, argued for the right and responsibility of Christians to read the Scriptures for themselves and for the right of private interpretation.

Luther also warned against reading into Scripture things that are not there. He affirmed the doctrine of the perspicuity (or clarity) of Scripture. This doctrine does not mean that every part of the Bible is equally clear. Luther acknowledged that biblical doctrine can be exceedingly complex and difficult, confounding the minds of the church’s best scholars. Interpreting the book of Revelation has been difficult for the church throughout the ages, and to this day we have no consensus on the proper interpretation of it. What Luther affirmed was that Scripture is clear in its basic message, that is, in communicating what is necessary for salvation. The gospel does not require a Ph.D. in theology or New Testament studies in order to be grasped. To Luther, the importance of getting the message of salvation to every person in the world far outweighs the dangers of corruption from private interpretations.

The Roman Catholic hierarchy feared that if people were left to interpret

the Bible for themselves, sects, denominations, and splinter groups would arise, and that is exactly what happened. Luther thought that if the Bible were in the hands of the common people, their misinterpretations would be dwarfed by the gospel knowledge they would gain. We take for granted that we can purchase a Bible in our language and read it without being arrested or tortured. But that was not the case for much of church history, during which the Bible was literally chained to the church lectern and only the priests were allowed to read it. At the heart of the concept of the private interpretation of Scripture is the concept of its clarity or perspicuity.

Embedded in this discussion is an important principle of hermeneutics, which refers to the proper rules of interpreting the Bible. One basic principle is that the implicit is always to be interpreted in light of the explicit, not vice versa.

John 3:16 gives us an example of this: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This text teaches explicitly that all who “believe” will not “perish” and will have “eternal life.” The text does not say who has the moral power or ability to believe, yet many people assume that everyone has this natural ability. But that is only implicit in the text, if there at all. Three chapters later, John quotes Jesus as saying, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father” (John 6:65). This is an explicit statement about our natural inability to come to Christ. But when people embrace the implicit idea from 3:16 that anyone is able to come to Christ, they have to bury the explicit teaching of 6:65 under it.

The framers of the Westminster Confession spelled out the same principle when they wrote: Those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. Here the principle in view is that the obscure must be interpreted in light of the plain, which is similar to interpreting the implicit in light of the explicit. If the Bible clearly teaches something in one passage, while another passage on the same topic uses arcane and mysterious symbols, we interpret the symbols in

light of the clear and plain teaching. If we use unclear or difficult passages to formulate our teaching and then distort the meaning of plain passages accordingly, we go astray. Always interpret the implicit in light of the explicit, the obscure in light of the clear. These underlying principles in the Reformed doctrine of hermeneutics presuppose that the Bible is the Word of God. The Holy Spirit is not an author of confusion; nor does God speak with lies or contradictions. Therefore, God is not going to say one thing in one place and a contradictory thing in another. Coherence and unity are present everywhere and are necessary in the revelation that comes from God. If we find what we think is a contradiction, the problem is with our sight, not with the Word of God. Contradiction is the hallmark of error.

8. The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.

The Reformation affirmed, in addition to the clarity of the Scriptures and the right of private interpretation, the right to translate the Bible into the vernacular, the language of the people. The fact that today we can read the Scriptures in English came with a price tag. The original translators of the Bible into English and other languages often paid for it with their lives. One of the first things that Luther undertook after the Diet of Worms in 1521, after fleeing to Wartburg Castle, was to translate the Bible into German. God has preserved His original message intact, and

the confession affirms that it is proper and appropriate to translate the Bible into various human languages.

Reformed theology teaches the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture. That affirmation applies only to the autographs—the original manuscripts created by those who wrote the Bible. The process of copying these manuscripts and of translating them into other languages is not inspired by God, as was the process of writing the original documents. Some people believe that the only viable English translation is the King James Version, but the church does not hold to the infallibility of translations. Different English translations sometimes translate the same verse in incompatible ways, and so at least one must be in error. We acknowledge errors in copying and translating, but the original message that came from God Himself is infallible. The confession affirms in section 8 the right to translate the Bible into the languages of the people, because the truth to be learned from those translations far exceeds the occasional error.

9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

In section 9 the authors come to the Reformed principle of hermeneutics known as *analogia fide* (the analogy of faith). This means that the primary rule of biblical interpretation is that Scripture is its own interpreter. The supreme interpreter of Holy Writ is the Holy Spirit, who inspired the text and who illumines and guides the believer in interpreting it. Serious dangers mark this process of interpretation. Throughout church history, there have been instances of so-called pneumatic exegesis or “spiritual interpretation” of the Bible. People claiming to have direct illumination from the Spirit have propounded bizarre interpretations of Scripture that cannot be objectively discerned in the text itself. They claim that the Holy Spirit has revealed to them the text’s “real meaning.” Others do what we call “lucky dipping.” When a problem arises in their life, they say a prayer, open the Bible at random, and put their finger on the open page. The verse so identified is presumed to be their Spirit-given answer, even though the text may have absolutely nothing to do

with the problem at hand. All such “spiritual interpretation” is unsupported by the confession. What the Holy Spirit inspired in one passage helps us understand what He inspired in another. We must interpret Scripture by Scripture.

A different kind of biblical interpretation has emerged in our day and worked its way deeply into the evangelical world: atomistic exegesis. In both philosophy and theology, an antipathy to any philosophical or theological system has arisen. Much of the scholarship in the last two centuries has been influenced, knowingly or unknowingly, by an existential approach to truth that abhors any systematic approach. What I feel at the moment is what matters, and everything else must adjust to it. Existential philosophy uses its opposition to systematics like a Procrustean bed. The Greek myth recounts that in order to fit travelers into his bed, Procrustes either stretched their bodies or cut off their legs. In this case, where the Bible does not fit the preferred philosophy, it is trimmed and forced to conform to it. With an existential approach, we can cut this text one day and stretch it the next. Or we can stretch this text to get it to fit with how we cut that other text. This faulty way of interpreting Scripture is a subtle step away from rejecting the system of doctrine contained in it.

Theological education has historically revolved around biblical studies, historical studies, and systematic theology. Systematic theology examines related passages of Scripture and comes to a unified knowledge of the whole. For example, classical systematic theologians study what Paul wrote on the subject of justification in Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians in order to determine the various aspects of his teaching. They assume that Paul’s doctrine of justification does not change from Galatians to Ephesians, since God is the author of it. But today, there is so little confidence in Scripture’s inspiration that some prefer to approach the Bible atomistically, studying specific bits of data in isolation without comparing them to each other. These scholars are so preoccupied with the particulars that they feel no obligation to see how the particulars stand with the universal.

This atomistic approach violates the principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture. In the Reformed analogy of faith, we trust the Word of God. We trust that what Paul teaches the church in Ephesus and what he

teaches the churches in Galatia are coherent, unified, and consistent. If there seem to be two alternative interpretations of a given passage, one of which is compatible and consistent with everything else the author says and one of which seems to be contradictory, common courtesy dictates that the author be allowed to speak coherently through the whole of his writings. It is bad hermeneutics to violate this standard with any author, but particularly so when the author is God Himself.

The full sense of any Scripture, according to section 9, is not manifold, but one. A professor once assigned his students one verse of Scripture, asking them to write down fifty things they had learned from it and turn in the assignment the next day. The students groaned, stayed up late that night, compared notes, and came dragging in the next day with their lists of fifty. The assignment for the next day was to prepare a list of fifty more. What the professor was endeavoring to inculcate in his students was that a single text of Scripture may have a thousand possible applications, but only one correct meaning. Discerning the original, intended meaning is called grammatico-historical exegesis. We do not have any right to look at a biblical text from the perspective of the twenty-first century and change its meaning. If the perspective of the twenty-first century doesn't fit with the Bible, it is the perspective that is wrong, not the Bible.

10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

Recapitulated in this final section of chapter 1 is the principle of *sola Scriptura*, which means that Scripture alone is the final, supreme arbiter of all theological controversies, all disputes and debates among Christians. It alone is the infallible rule of faith and life.

With the rise of Neoorthodox theology in the first half of the twentieth century came a strong rejection of propositional revelation. The advocates of Neoorthodoxy contended that the Bible is not an objective body of propositional truth but instead a witness to truth. Karl Barth, for example, popularized the idea that the Bible becomes the Word of God if and

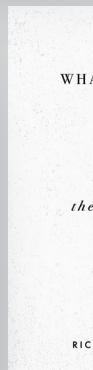
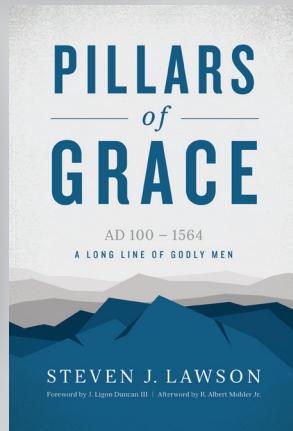
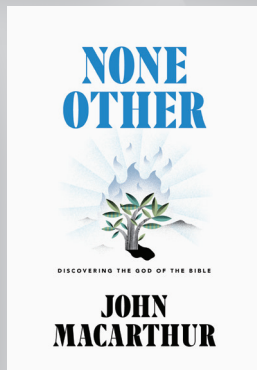
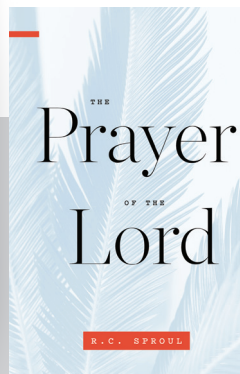
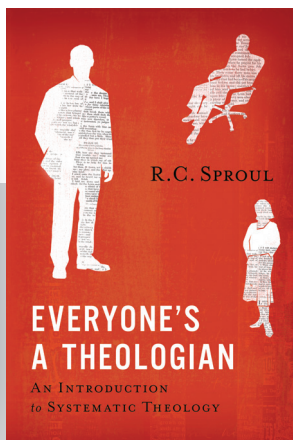
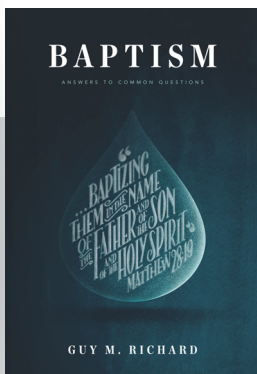
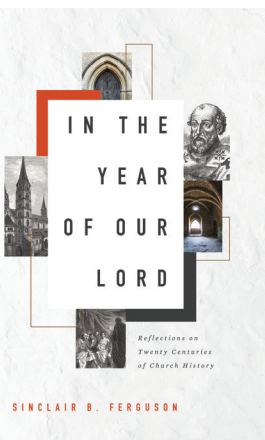
when the Spirit speaks through it—although in and of itself the Bible is not the Word of God. Barth claimed that the Bible's words somehow become transformed into the Word of God when the Spirit uses that text to speak to us. This was a radical form of existentializing the biblical record, and it has caused far-reaching consequences in the life of the church.

Others today are departing from the confession's teaching that the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. They claim that the Bible is infallible only when it speaks on matters of faith and practice, not when it talks about history, science, or anything else not directly related to religious faith or practice. But section 10 affirms that the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures is infallible in the whole of our lives—in everything He teaches and everything He touches. He is supreme. There is not one body of truth found in Scripture and a distinct body found in the world. The Bible never steps outside its area of expertise, because the ultimate Author is not just an expert on everything, but He knows all things and made all things.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., first president of Reformation Bible College, and executive editor of *Tabletalk* magazine. His radio program, *Renewing Your Mind*, is still broadcast daily on hundreds of radio stations around the world and can also be heard online. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God*, and *Everyone's a Theologian*. He was recognized throughout the world for his articulate defense of the inerrancy of Scripture and the need for God's people to stand with conviction upon His Word.

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