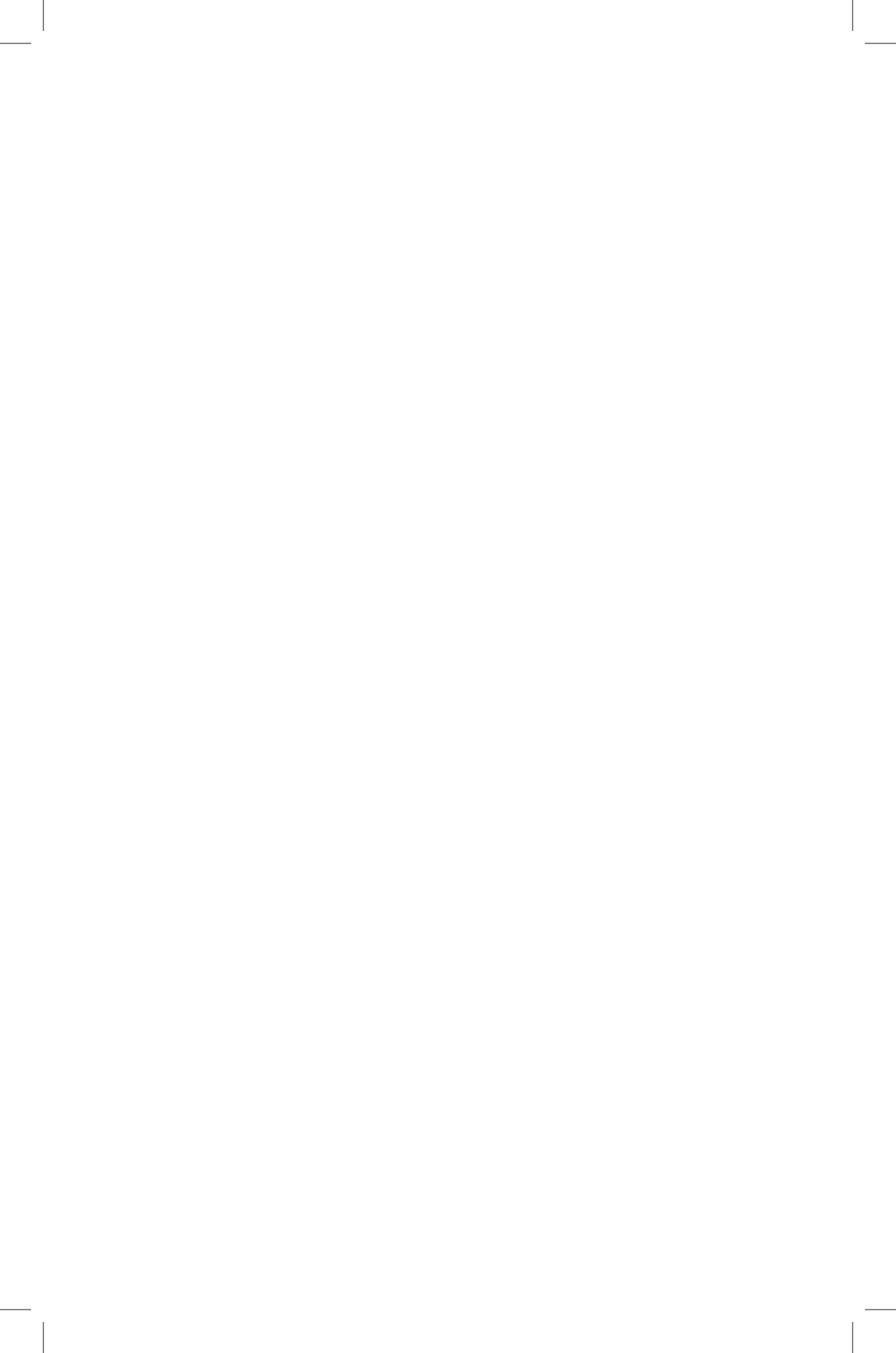


CONFESSING  
THE FAITH



# CONFESSING THE FAITH

*A reader's guide to the  
Westminster Confession of Faith*



Chad Van Dixhoorn



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

# THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

The Grey House, 3 Murrayfield Road, Edinburgh, EH12 6EL, UK  
P.O. Box 621, Carlisle, PA 17013, USA



© Chad Van Dixhoorn 2014



ISBN:

Print: 978-1-84871-404-5

EPUB: 978-1-84871-405-2

Kindle: 978-1-84871-406-9



Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro 10.5/13.5 pt at

The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh

Printed in the USA by

Versa Press Inc.,

East Peoria, IL



In this book the author cites from the King James Version (KJV), New International Version (NIV), American Standard Version (ASV), English Standard Version (ESV), New American Standard Version (NASB), and offers his own translations where warranted.

*Fight the good fight of the faith.  
Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about  
which you made the good confession  
in the presence of many witnesses.*

1 Timothy 6:12

For Victoria, Caroline, Ashley, Peter and Charlotte.  
May each of you make a good confession  
before many witnesses.



# CONTENTS

---

<i>Foreword</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
<i>Introduction</i>	xvii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xxvi
FOUNDATIONS	
Chapter 1: Of the Holy Scripture	3
Chapter 2: Of God, and of the Holy Trinity	29
THE DECREES OF GOD	
Chapter 3: Of God's Eternal Decree	43
Chapter 4: Of Creation	59
Chapter 5: Of Providence	67
SIN AND THE SAVIOUR	
Chapter 6: Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment Thereof	83
Chapter 7: Of God's Covenant with Man	95
Chapter 8: Of Christ the Mediator	107
SALVATION	
Chapter 9: Of Free Will	135
Chapter 10: Of Effectual Calling	145
Chapter 11: Of Justification	159
Chapter 12: Of Adoption	171
Chapter 13: Of Sanctification	177

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

Chapter 14: Of Saving Faith	185
Chapter 15: Of Repentance unto Life	193
Chapter 16: Of Good Works	203
Chapter 17: Of the Perseverance of the Saints	217
Chapter 18: Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation	225

## LAW AND LIBERTY

Chapter 19: Of the Law of God	239
Chapter 20: Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience	259

## WORSHIP

Chapter 21: Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day	275
Chapter 22: Of Lawful Oaths and Vows	297

## CIVIL GOVERNMENT AND FAMILY

Chapter 23: Of the Civil Magistrate	307
Chapter 24: Of Marriage, and Divorce	323

## THE CHURCH

Chapter 25: Of the Church	335
Chapter 26: Of the Communion of Saints	349
Chapter 27: Of the Sacraments	357
Chapter 28: Of Baptism	365
Chapter 29: Of the Lord's Supper	383
Chapter 30: Of Church Censures	401
Chapter 31: Of Synods and Councils	409

## THE LAST THINGS

Chapter 32: Of the State of Men after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead	425
Chapter 33: Of the Last Judgment	435



## FOREWORD

---

RECENT years have witnessed a growing interest in what is increasingly known as ‘confessional Christianity’. This is a most encouraging development because the term generally refers to a Christianity which takes doctrine seriously. ‘Confessional Christians’ are those who believe that the Bible actually teaches things about God which apply in all times and in all places to all people. Doctrine is not simply a description of religious psychology—how the Christian thinks or feels about God—but rather a description of who God is and how he has acted. That more Christians are prepared to self-consciously identify with such a conception of Christianity is grounds for gratitude and joy.

Nevertheless, there is more to truly *confessional* Christianity than mere belief in the importance of doctrine. In fact, I have a suspicion that today’s ‘confessional Christianity’ is simply a reiteration of what used to be called simply ‘conservative’ Christianity: a Christianity which believes in the non-negotiability of ten or twelve basic points of doctrine, usually embodied in a congregation’s doctrinal statement.

Confessional Christianity is more than that. Confessional Christianity is marked by two things: an elaborate confession of faith which goes beyond the ten or twelve points necessary for a basic Christian profession of faith; and a church structure which provides for elders, accountability and indeed ongoing pedagogy. Confessional Christians, therefore, are not simply committed to doctrine; they are committed to a particular way of life within the context of the church. If the ‘confessional Christianity’ which is currently so popular is to service and indeed mature and thrive, it needs to become confessional Christianity in the more traditional, ecclesial sense.

Confessionally Reformed Christians tend to look to one of two sets of documents for their doctrinal statements: the Three Forms of Unity

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

(the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt) and the Westminster Standards (The Confession, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms). Reformed churches with origins in Germany and the Netherlands tend to hold to the former, those with Scottish Presbyterian roots to the latter. There is little difference in doctrine between the two, with both providing solid and thorough expositions of the faith.

Given all that, this book is an excellent contribution to the literature on confessional Christianity and will, I trust, be of immense help in further educating confessional Christians in their faith. ‘World authority’, like ‘expert’, is a much over-used hyperbole these days, when any Hollywood star with a passport is regarded as competent to comment on world affairs. Yet in the case of Chad Van Dixhoorn and the Westminster Confession, the title is most apt. As editor of the Minutes of the Westminster assembly, Chad has spent more time and devoted more attention to the minutiae of the Confession than anyone else has ever done, excepting perhaps the Westminster delegates themselves. There is no safer or more learned guide to the Confession.

Chad is also a churchman and pastor. Scholarship is one thing; the ability to deploy that scholarship for the benefit of the church is quite another. Chad does both with aplomb. This book is learned but it is also accessible, the fruit of immense and intense study but also of a deep love for God’s people.

In short, this guide is a true gem. It deserves to be the standard reference book for any pastor seeking to use the Westminster Standards in his ministry. It should be the first volume for which any Sunday School teacher reaches when asked to do a class on the Confession. It should be the constant companion of all elders. Indeed, it should be on the bookshelves of anyone interested in learning more deeply about the riches of the Reformed and Presbyterian faith. Enjoy—and learn.

CARL R. TRUEMAN

Paul Woolley Professor of Church History,  
Westminster Theological Seminary  
Pastor, Cornerstone Presbyterian Church,  
Ambler, Pennsylvania  
February 2014

## PREFACE

---

I was taught that a preface needs to announce what a book is about, offer an excuse for writing it, and make a case for reading it.

This book is a biblical discussion of thirty-three doctrinal topics. It takes the form of a reader's guide to a statement of faith issued more than three and a half centuries ago—a confession which has since that time been in constant and widespread use in the Christian church, and has come to be known as the Westminster Confession of Faith.

I engaged in this study because I expected that it would be instructive to me and I hoped that it could be useful to others too. I chose to write on this particular confession of faith because I have found that I can identify very closely with its teaching and because I have learned something of the historical and theological ecosystems in which it developed. I should also confess, because it will be obvious to my colleagues, that this is the kind of book that historians write when they wish to further a knowledge of God without the risk of writing their own systematic theology.

In commending this classic creed and commenting on it I am not writing without sympathy for modern conversations in theology. But I am writing as an historian and as a Christian who is deeply appreciative of the power and majesty of some classic statements of faith. For those two reasons—a commitment to history and a conviction about truth—this commentary contains doxology and exhortation. I was not sure how a creedal statement synthesized by Puritans and sympathetically elaborated by a confessing Christian could not end up infused with praise for God and application for the Christian life.

Whether this commentary was worth writing, readers will have to judge for themselves. But the confession itself is worthy of consideration

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

and can more than make up for any deficiencies in the commentary. The Westminster Confession of Faith is a summary of biblical doctrine. But it is more than that. It is a creed, and one from which all evangelical Christians will derive much benefit if it is carefully studied. This is a text rich in theology, offering a wealth of biblical and doctrinal reflection. It is not flawless. Nonetheless it is very good. And I consider its age to be more of a benefit than a liability; it is good to study texts which remind us that Christianity was not invented last Tuesday.

Convinced of its merits, I am offering a fresh look at an historic statement of faith that has proved its usefulness over time. Admittedly, commentaries on confessions constitute a genre of theological literature that is not widely celebrated in the Christian community. For many years confessional theology was reduced to an eddy within mainstream evangelicalism. On the whole we have preferred brief statements of faith and the briefer the better. That said, there may be a growing recognition that doctrinal minimalism could be the Achilles heel of evangelicalism.

In my mind, the typical evangelical ‘creed’ is in fact too small, and not sufficiently theological. It should not be enough for the evangelical movement to enjoy buoyant moments in the political sphere. We must be able to analyse and respond to powerful currents within our culture that undermine the church and the Christian faith. One part of our response must be to deepen the faith of leaders and laity in evangelical churches. As I see it, the church needs to experiment with theological maximalism in place of its current minimalism if we are to maintain a faithful witness to Christ in our generation. A dozen doctrinal points on a website is probably inadequate for the church’s thriving, for its mission not only to *evangelize* but also to *teach* the nations. This creed from Westminster holds out a large faith for us to own, a welcome view of the triune God and his work, and an unusually robust statement of the gospel of Christ. I hope readers will consider carefully the commentary, but especially the confession, and discover that the good news this book celebrates is not too good to be true.

### ***Suggestions for reading this book***

Similar to the successful study of any subject, learning theology does not just ‘happen’. It requires a plan. One possible plan for reading this book,

and thus for learning some Christian doctrine, is to read a section each day. As readers will notice, almost every chapter has been divided into bite-sized portions of roughly equal length that take approximately ten to twelve minutes to read aloud, perhaps less if read silently. Individuals, families, or educators who prefer ready-made discussion questions may be interested to know that a study guide is in preparation. It will direct readers to the confession, the commentary, and the Scriptures, and will offer questions of personal application.

I hope that this text will be used by college and seminary students needing a new lens through which to view classical Christian theology, and by elders- and deacons-in-training in Reformed churches. But I am especially hopeful that church members, including younger people, will be exposed to this confession. Students study Shakespeare, biology, and business theory. They should be able to tackle a Christian confession. And arguably, the most demanding part of this book may be its preface. So if you have made it this far, you might as well finish it.

CHAD VAN DIXHOORN  
Reformed Theological Seminary  
Washington, DC  
31 October 2013



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

**I**F there is any strength to this collection of comments on the Westminster Confession of Faith it is owed to those who exercised much patience in hearing and reading my reflections over the past fifteen years. Craig Troxel and the elders and members of Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Glenside, Pennsylvania first gave me the opportunity to think aloud on the confession while a seminary student. Ten years later, Ian Hamilton and Peter Leverton were willing to grant me the opportunity to share my more developed thoughts with the members of Cambridge Presbyterian Church during post-doctoral studies. A few years ago Grace Presbyterian Church in Vienna, Virginia, began to receive yet another iteration of lectures on the confession.

In the transition process from lecture to book, Pierre Du Plessis, Richard Gaffin IV, Elizabeth Flanagan, and Mike Warner read many or all of these pages, making useful suggestions; my eldest daughter Victoria helped double-check many scriptural references; my mother hunted for grammatical mistakes. Colin Roworth, at the Banner of Truth Trust in Edinburgh, kindly flagged irritating inconsistencies in the commentary. Mark Garcia prepared a scripture index with a generous head-start from John Bower; Jennifer Redd developed a helpful subject index with a timely grant from Reformed Theological Seminary's Randall Fund. My wife Emily, who is also my greatest encouragement, made valuable observations along the way and is in the process of producing a study guide, which I eagerly anticipate, based upon this commentary. Together they have paved a better path for future readers.

A further feedback loop has been provided by the theological communities which I serve. I have received assessment of this material from seminary students (and from fellow ministers posing as students) at the

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

Ministerial Training Institute of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, and at Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. Comments from Paul Jeon, Matthew Judd, Mike Law and Peter Wallace led to further clarifications, and questions from Scott R. Clark, Richard Gaffin, Jr., and Robert Letham led to longer footnotes. This is a sturdier book because of them.

The most extensive assessment came from five additional friends and colleagues: Peter Lee, whose office is down the hall at Reformed Theological Seminary in DC; then Mark Garcia and Rowland Ward, old friends serving congregations in Pennsylvania and Australia, respectively; and finally, in Edinburgh and South Ayrshire, Jonathan Watson, the very capable editor of the Banner of Truth Trust, and Dr Graham Keith, who ably served as copy editor for the Banner. These men have invested enormous time and energy in reading and commenting on the whole of this text. For their poking and prodding I am profoundly grateful.



# INTRODUCTION

---

## *The Westminster assembly (1643-1653)*

Two years prior to the gathering of an assembly of theologians in Westminster Abbey (from whence the Westminster Confession of Faith derives its name), a prominent pastor named Edmund Calamy urged the House of Commons to reform the Church of England. This was no nostalgic look back to the Edenic days of England's boy-king, the evangelical and Reformed Edward VI. On the contrary, Calamy urged Parliament to 'reform the Reformation itself'. It was not until 1643 that Calamy's modern reformation took shape in the calling of what proved to be the last of the great post-Reformation synods.

It is easier to announce a maxim than it is to live it. This was certainly true for the one hundred and twenty theologians of the Westminster assembly, for they had to decide how to reform the church and its doctrinal standards. The Westminster assembly was summoned by the English Parliament during its bloody civil war with King Charles I in the early 1640s. The synod's remit was to propose to Parliament any corrections which might need to be made to the existing structures, worship, and teaching of the church. In other words, the gathering was tasked with doing what Puritans within the church had long dreamed of doing. There were also those outside the English church who longed for reform, namely the Scottish Presbyterians. Left with the lingering, bitter taste of English interference in their church affairs, they had become convinced that only a major reform in the church to the south could safeguard the core teachings of their church in the north.

On a national and local level, the Westminster assembly was instrumental in purging the English church of many appalling preachers and filling it with less appalling ones. On the international stage, it attempted

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

to revise, and eventually rewrote, texts for the churches of England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland. It drafted directions for church government, published a guide for public worship, issued statements on doctrine, corresponded with foreign churches, authored two catechisms, and wrote a new confession of faith.

Really, Edmund Calamy and his colleagues should have been very pleased, but they were not. The task of revising or writing a document such as a directory or confession looked easier than it really was. While individual ministers could state their own understanding of the Bible, it was much harder to come to agreement as a group. Then (as now) there were too many architects wanting reform and too few builders who could actually effect it. The experience was frustrating, leaving Calamy to mourn that ‘noe man knows what this reformation is. This is a sin & misery’.

### *The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)*

In 1644 Edmund Calamy was in despair but by 1646 the assembly had managed to finish its landmark confession. The end product was worth celebrating then and still is today. Indeed the assembly’s statement of faith is a truly remarkable text in the history of Christianity, and all who peruse its pages will find a sure-footed summary of truth for life.

The Westminster Confession is a summary of Christian theology in the Reformation tradition. It digests more than thirty distinct truths of Scripture, each topic originally entitled an ‘Article’ of faith, in imitation of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. It is probably because the confession was intended to replace the Thirty-nine Articles that it is written in the voice of a third person and not the voice of the first person: its pages declare what the Bible teaches rather than declaring what the saints believe the Bible to teach. Like the Thirty-nine Articles, it presents orthodoxy more authoritatively than personally.

Nonetheless, for those who embrace the Christian story and the meaning of that story as it is told here, this confession does declare what the saints believe; once believed it becomes personal. The confession’s opening pages rejoice in the wonder of God’s revelation of himself in the world and in the Word. Whole paragraphs linger over the fullness and clarity of the Scriptures, and show marked deference to the authority

and finality of the Bible's sixty-six books. With devotion and delight, the confession goes on to consider the God who reveals himself in all his perfections. With reverence and awe the Westminster divines strive to say what can be said of the God who is one and the God who is three. The glories of the eternal God occupy some lines; the 'most loving, gracious' and 'merciful' character of God occupies others.

Readers will quickly see that, chapter by chapter, the Westminster Confession of Faith traces the great history of our redemption: the grim realities of the fall, God's gracious covenants with man, the stunning announcement of salvation, and our sure hope of eternal life—all these are sketched out in bold but considered strokes. It is because of the clarity of this gospel presentation in all of its parts that the Westminster Confession of Faith finds itself in the first rank of great Christian creeds. It is valued by Reformed Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians, and treasured by Presbyterians. Perhaps it is the wisest of creeds in its teaching and the finest in its doctrinal expression. Certainly it is a reliable guide to the Scriptures, which are the only reliable guide to God. In fact users will find that reflection on the chapters of the confession often leads to the study of the words of Scripture. Few other exercises can provide such rich returns on one's investment in time.

Viewing the text as a whole, the Westminster Confession of Faith enjoys three great strengths. The first lies in the coherence and clarity of its carefully focused chapters, each of them organized around a major doctrinal or biblical theme. Writing at the end of the long Reformation, the members of the Westminster assembly (1643–1653) were eager to harvest the best biblical exegesis of the Reformers, the most useful doctrinal structures of the medieval theologians, and the most enduring insights of the church fathers. The members of the assembly read widely from all three of these groups and invested enormous time and energy in synthesizing their findings into this 12,000-word document. They also reflected personally on the wider implications of these doctrines and attempted to thoughtfully live out the theology they confessed. In this confession we see the fruit of their labours.

The second distinguishing feature of this confession is its use as a guide to readers of the Bible. The confession offers paragraphs written for the sole purpose of helping Christians to understand scriptural words

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

and phrases. The assembly also offered 2,500 ‘proof-texts’ in support of the confession’s teaching. For those with the patience to investigate the biblical basis for Christian doctrine, a study of this declaration of faith and its supporting passages of Scripture will yield rich dividends. But patience is essential, for there are no explanations attached to the passages that are cited by the assembly. Scholars will recognize that these texts function as footnotes not only to scriptural passages but also to a Reformed understanding of those passages which we can access in books written at or before the time of the assembly. However most of us do not have access to these old books, and thus understanding these scriptural references requires careful reflection, prayer, and even meditation before the light that these verses shone on our forefathers can shine on us too. Nonetheless, properly employed, this is an asset on which diligent readers can build.

The third major advantage of this confession is that it deals not only with fundamental doctrines that are obvious, but also with some fundamental doctrines that are difficult. Many of the topics raised in this confession of faith have deterred the faint-hearted, such as the problem of evil, the divine decrees, and the freedom or bondage of the will. The assembly offers careful sketches on each subject as well as clear counterpoints to associated errors; both new initiates to Christianity and seasoned theologians will find these outlines helpful.

The assembly’s confession is clear, offers a good guide to the Bible, and provides a useful treatment of difficult doctrines. Nonetheless, it is not as crisp a treatment of Christian doctrine as it could be. This is due, in part, to the fact that any attempt to treat doctrinal subjects as isolated areas of theology is open to border disputes between those topics. How can one round out a doctrine of justification and not say something about the atonement or saving faith? In the end the Westminster assembly was more dedicated to discussing each topic thoroughly than to crafting a confession concisely.

However, readers not only wonder about redundancy. They sometimes also query the confession’s specificity. Why is it not enough to speak simply about being ‘saved’ or being ‘in Christ’? Why must the confession also define ‘justification’ and ‘imputation’ and ‘forgiveness’? If I am to be candid, it seems to me that one reason for the specificity

of the confession has to do with the simple pleasure of its authors. Thoughtful Christians sometimes develop an appetite for God that can become an insatiable desire to discover fresh reasons for doxology. As it happens, the Scriptures provide this kind of food for thought and praise because component parts of doctrines, and not simply large clusters of Christian truth, are presented in the Bible for our attention and meditation. We are told to rejoice in the details of his saving plan and in the distinct blessings we receive from God and his gospel. Serious students in Christ's school become instinctively equipped to enjoy every brush stroke on the canvas of God's revelation of redemption, and not simply the final effect that the Master has produced.

The other reason why we see a careful attention to precise terminology in this confession is that labelling can promote learning. We see this in chemistry or grammar. We see this in theology too. Take the doctrine of justification as an example. The Scriptures tell us about a true righteousness being credited to those who do not deserve it and a free gift of forgiveness purchased for sinners. Sometimes the Scriptures tether this credited righteousness to justification, sometimes they tie forgiveness to justification. The authors of this confession, like many Bible readers before and after them, noted these frequent associations of words and ideas and, in this case, concluded that 'justification' must be the Bible's umbrella term for credited righteousness and divine forgiveness, two distinct but united aspects of the one doctrine of justification.

Now having discovered such detail after careful study of the Scriptures, it is hardly possible for an attentive Christian to be content only to speak of 'justification in general' or 'the word justification as it was understood in the Greek world'. No, since biblical authors give specific content to doctrine and to words, responsible biblical study requires that this content be identified, explained, and confessed. This is what the Westminster Confession of Faith does in all of its chapters: it introduces doctrinal ideas, outlines how they are parsed and associated in the Bible, and helps the reader confess these doctrines in a thoughtful way.

### ***The text of the confession***

That is not to say that the Westminster assembly got it all right, and this commentary does, from time to time, first state the assembly's own

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

perspective on an issue and then argue against it. This commentary also discusses some American amendments to the confession carried out in four stages, with significant revisions taking place in 1788, followed by other changes in 1887, 1903 and 1936.

The late eighteenth-century revisions affected confessional chapters 20.4, 23.3 and 31.2 and reflected a changed perspective on the relationship between the church and the state. The eighteenth-century revisions also included changing Larger Catechism answer 109, which originally prohibited ‘tolerating a false religion’, a proscription no longer tenable in the American State, and changing a word in answer 142, which had originally prohibited ‘depopulations’, a ban which was embarrassing given the ongoing European settlement of territory once belonging to native Americans.

A late nineteenth-century revision merely relaxed the church’s rules in chapter 24.4 about remarriage to a close relative of a deceased spouse. The early twentieth-century revisions, by contrast, were extensive. The Presbyterian Church in the USA rewrote chapter 16.7 on the good works of unbelievers, it removed the last sentence of chapter 22.3 and thus softened the requirements for taking oaths, it helpfully rewrote chapter 25.6, and removed a reference to the Pope of Rome as the antichrist, and it added two new chapters, one on the Holy Spirit and the other on the love of God and missions. The addition of two new chapters and the revisions to chapter 16.7 were changes leaning towards an Arminian, rather than a distinctively Reformed, presentation of doctrine.

Breaking away from the main Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1936, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) determined to retain all revisions prior to 1903, and reject most of those proposed in 1903. It did approve the 1903 change to chapter 22.3, and while it rejected the rewritten chapter 25.6 of 1903, the OPC did agree with the removal of the reference to the Pope as antichrist. The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) has adopted the 1936 text as their own, and other confessional Presbyterian bodies allow their church officers to use the same text, or make the same conscientious exceptions to the original text.

In order to aid readers unfamiliar with older English, I have reprinted in a parallel column the *Modern English Study Version of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, © 1993 The Committee on Christian Education of

the OPC, gratefully acknowledging the committee's kind permission to use their text. This text has no constitutional authority in the OPC, but it can, nonetheless, be useful for those who are seeking to grasp the general meaning of the original text. The Banner of Truth has made no changes to this modern study version except to standardize spelling according to current British norms.

Actual interpretation of a text should use the most reliable version available. The primary text of the confession printed in this commentary is a (gratefully acknowledged) version of John Bower's critical edition of the assembly's 1640s text, complete with scriptural proof-texts, and painstakingly reconstructed text in his book, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Grand Rapids, expected 2014). I believe that the series of critical editions of assembly texts being edited by John are the best to date and unlikely to be surpassed by subsequent scholars. The confessional text as it appears here is Dr Bower's own work in which only the spelling and capitalization of the critical text is standardized for ecclesiastical use. The Banner of Truth has made no changes to Dr Bower's text except to further standardize capitalization. John Bower, in setting this text, has updated spelling and archaic forms (thus 'farre' is rendered as 'far', and 'doth' as 'does'). The original punctuation, quirky and awkward as it may be, is useful for interpretation and has been retained. For a lack of a better title, I have termed it the 'Historic Text', and it is set alongside the modern version in parallel columns throughout. Superscript references to Scripture proofs in the Historic Text follow the traditional pattern of the confession, and thus do not include 'j' or 'v' (neither of which was considered a distinct letter from 'i' or 'u').

In this book I primarily comment on the historic text (the left column), but also comment on the revisions to the original edition, as accepted by the OPC in 1936 (the right column). Where these revised lines or paragraphs occur in chapters 20.4, 22.3, 23.3, 24.4, 25.6 and 31.2, they are set beside the original text of the confession in a centred parallel column. The text of the American revisions of 1788 is taken from *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1789). I have modernized the spelling and capitalization of the 1789 text, but not punctuation. As the

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

1788 revisions did not include proofs of Scripture, I have supplied proof-texts for these revisions from the OPC's current edition of its confession of faith. All confessional revisions subsequent to 1788 constitute only the removal of phrases, and thus do not require the citation of particular editions.

### *This commentary*

Any claim to originality in this commentary lies principally in two main areas, both of them historical in nature. First, this is an attempt to expound one late Reformation text and not Reformed theology generally conceived. This is not a book intended to reflect the author's own theological interests or preferred emphases. It is a study of the Westminster Confession of Faith, and for that reason the chapter on creation does not address evolution and the chapter on marriage does not discuss feminism. As it happens, many historical facts, much redemptive history, and many connections between doctrines interest me and occupy my energies as a minister or as a historian. Nonetheless, they are not discussed in the confession, and are thus not pursued here.

It is because I attempt to be sensitive to the historical context and the creative process behind the Westminster Confession of Faith that I do not make much of the order of its chapters. The arrangement of the chapters themselves is logical, not loose and disjointed. It is usually easy to see why one chapter follows or is grouped with another. Nonetheless, it is not the case that any one chapter derives its content from another, or that there is a single doctrine upon which all the others are built like an inverted pyramid. Undoubtedly some theologians, especially in the twentieth century, have pursued one or another theological idea in such a way that it has determined every other idea. However, theologians in the seventeenth century attempted to deduce both a doctrine's content and its significance through a process of biblical exegesis. I have sought to understand this text in that light.

The second related characteristic of this commentary is its attempt to enrich and inform the interpretation of the text of the confession by reflecting on the portions of Scripture cited by the Westminster assembly. After each phrase and chapter of the confession was drafted, the assembly debated and then approved a series of scriptural passages in



support of that doctrine. Later, the gathering was required by Parliament to provide references to Scripture alongside the confession. The assembly did so reluctantly as it had no opportunity to explain, by a mere citation of a text, the exegesis of that text. But once the assembly's members accepted the task, they chose supporting passages of Scripture carefully, refining the list of scriptural passages approved in their earlier debates. In attempting to use these biblical texts to understand confessional phrases, this book, again, strives to be both an historical and a textual study. Of course modern editions of the confession sometimes employ alternative proof-texts which sometimes offer even better biblical support to the assembly's own doctrines. Nonetheless, as they offer no insight into the assembly's own thinking, I do not refer to them here.

Since the assembly did not explain how each text was to be interpreted, I have endeavoured to construe biblical passages in ways agreeable to interpretations prevalent in and prior to the seventeenth century. My use of scriptural passages rests on my knowledge of the assembly's texts and debates, the writings of assembly members, and that of contemporary and prior exegetes. When in doubt I checked these sources for plausibility, and I hope that other students of the history of exegesis will be able to concur with my use and expositions of these texts.

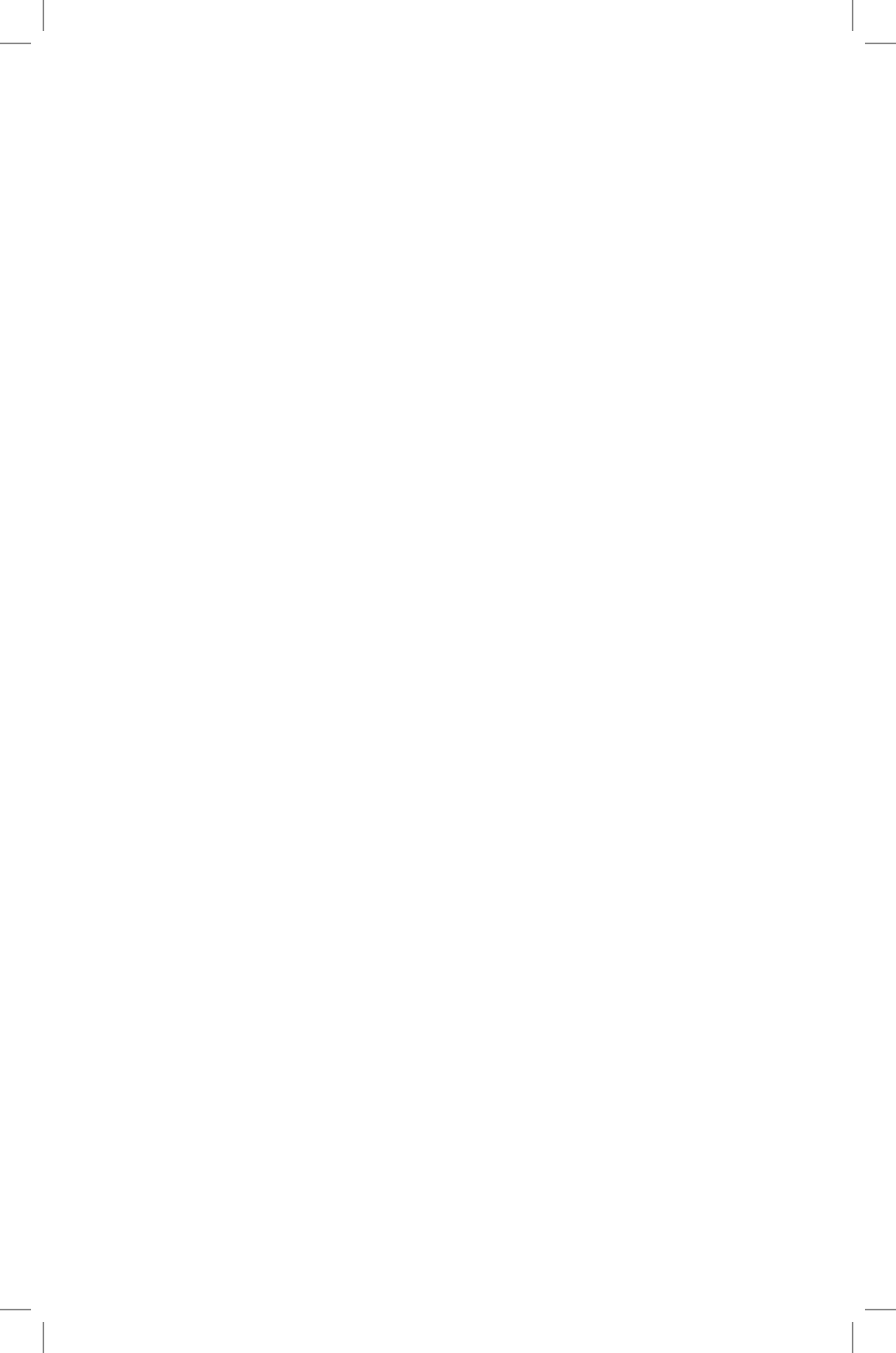
# ABBREVIATIONS

---

- WCF Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)
- WLC Westminster Larger Catechism (1647)
- WSC Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)
- RCF Revised Confession of Faith (1788, 1887, 1903, or 1936)
- OED Oxford English Dictionary

# FOUNDATIONS

---



CHAPTER 1:  
OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE

---

*Historic Text*

1.1 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;<sup>a</sup> yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation.<sup>b</sup> Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church;<sup>c</sup> 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;<sup>d</sup> which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary;<sup>e</sup> those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.<sup>f</sup>

**Scripture Proofs**

1.1 <sup>a</sup> Rom. 2:14,15; Rom. 1:19,20; Psa. 19:1-3; Rom. 1:32, with Rom. 2:1.  
<sup>b</sup> 1 Cor. 1:21; 1 Cor. 2:13,14. <sup>c</sup> Heb. 1:1. <sup>d</sup> Prov. 22:19-21; Luke 1:3,4; Rom. 15:4; Matt. 4:4,7,10; Isa. 8:19,20. <sup>e</sup> 2 Tim. 3:15; 2 Pet. 1:19. <sup>f</sup> Heb. 1:1,2.

*Modern Version*

1.1 Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, to such an extent that men are without excuse, yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of his will which is necessary for salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at various times and in diverse ways, to reveal himself and to declare his will to his church; and afterward—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 this revelation wholly to writing. Therefore the Holy Scripture is most necessary, God's former ways of revealing his will to his people having ceased.

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

### ***General revelation: conscience, creation, and providence***

The opening chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith begins with the doctrine of Holy Scripture. The opening sentence does not. Instead, this historic statement of doctrine begins by reminding us that God has revealed himself to all people, even to those without a Bible. The confession mentions that this general revelation comes to us in two forms. There is 'the light of nature', by which is meant the divine imprint which is left on each of us by our Maker. That is, we are made in God's image and even though we are fallen creatures, God's image remains stamped upon us. And there are 'the works of creation and providence.' The world that we see and the world about which we read tell us of our Creator and Provider, the one who once made and now upholds all things.

These forms of general revelation, both the one inside us and the one around us, are astonishing in what they declare. They should be valued highly by every person; for they 'manifest' or show forth 'the goodness' of God, his 'wisdom' and his 'power'. It is the unexpected beauty and intricacy of this revelation which leaves us breathless at times, as we view the world around us. It is this revelation which leads Christians to prayer and praise; for it reveals the true God, rather than offering a vague sense that there is some kind of a god.

Here, unmistakably, the confession is following the trail laid down by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1-2 (see esp. *Rom.* 1:19, 20, 32; 2:1, 14, 15; cf. *Psa.* 19:1-3). In those chapters the apostle both reminds us of this general revelation and tells us that it leaves every person without an excuse before God. For this reason, both in our evangelism and in our defence of the faith, we should always remember that Christians should never be trying to prove the existence of God to unbelievers. We are reminding unbelievers of what they already know. Every person has been stung with a knowledge of God; there is an Existence about which they may be intensely aware, or which they may consciously or subconsciously suppress. But every person knows enough about God that they ought never to stop searching for him.

***Special revelation: the Word of God***

This general revelation has limits. As the confession reminds us, ‘they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation.’ Human wisdom has its boundaries, as Paul reminded the Corinthians repeatedly (*e.g.*, *1 Cor.* 1:21; 2:13, 14). This is especially true when it comes to the gospel. The most thoughtful or meditative person will not find true hope by looking within, and no explorer will ever find the way to eternal life merely by travelling through this wide creation.

Therefore, since the real objective of Christian theology, and of this confession, is to show the way *to* life and the way *to live* life, this chapter goes on to tell us about God’s spoken revelation. Quoting from the author of the letter to the Hebrews, the confession reminds us that ‘it pleased the Lord, at sundry (or various) times, and in divers manners (or different ways), to reveal himself’.

Above all, it is the purpose of Scripture to reveal God. It is his self-revelation, for it is not only the case that he himself is the one who reveals, but it is also the case that what he reveals is his own self. No other subject than God himself could be worthy of such a book. And yet the comprehensiveness of biblical revelation and the extent to which it moulds a Christian’s view of all things mean that sometimes we lose sight of the central purpose and message of the Bible. So great is the magnitude and impact of God’s self-disclosure and all that it entails that we can sometimes lose the epicentre for the aftershocks. And so this confession reminds us of the obvious: this is the book about God.

Although the coherence of this book lies in God himself, who is its central theme, it also ‘pleased the Lord’ to reveal in the Scriptures ‘his will unto his church’—which is to say, his will regarding salvation. This revelation of the road to a life with God has come to men and women through conversations with God, visions and dreams, and visits by angels. It came once from the very hand of God on the two tablets of stone which contained the Ten Commandments. And as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, it came most often through God’s prophets (*Heb.* 1:1).

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

Nonetheless, for our generous God, even this was not enough! In his goodness and wisdom God used his great power to commit his revelation of himself into a written form. He gave us the Bible. There are many reasons why God should have done this, but among them are the reasons mentioned in the confession. God wanted ‘better to preserve and propagate his truth’. And he wished firmly to establish the church against three untiring opponents: ‘the corruption of our own flesh, the malice of Satan, and the malice of the world’. You may remember how Isaiah called the Israelites to God’s Word when the world called them to experiment with witches or wizards (*Isa.* 8:19, 20), and how our Lord used Scripture to refute Satan himself (*Matt.* 4:4, 7, 10). The Word of God is intended to give us certainty (*Prov.* 22:19-21; *Luke* 1:3, 4) and comfort (*Rom.* 15:4) even against our worst enemies. How much more should we use it in our day-to-day struggles and trials!

Little wonder then that we are reminded here just how necessary this revelation from God is. It is ‘most necessary’. What else could it be? After all, it reveals a ‘knowledge of God’ and a knowledge of what is ‘necessary for salvation’ (*cf.* 2 *Tim.* 3:15), and since it is useful for building up the church and defending us from our enemies, the Scriptures are necessary for the good spiritual health of Christian people, and necessary for the very existence of the church and its doctrine.

The Bible is also necessary because God no longer reveals himself by dreams and visions and prophets. Those vehicles of revelation are no longer needed and they no longer function. William Gouge, a Puritan patriarch at the Westminster assembly, argued that ‘pretence of new light and immediate inspiration in these daies, is a meer pretence’.<sup>1</sup> Francis Cheynell complained of people in his day who too quickly gave a platform to anyone who had persuaded himself that he had some spiritual interpretation of the Word by ‘inspiration, suggestion’ or ‘assistance of the Holy Ghost’.<sup>2</sup> And George Walker, yet another member of the

<sup>1</sup> William Gouge, *A Learned and Very Useful Commentary on the Whole Epistle to the Hebrewes* (London, 1655), part 4, p. 77. Daniel Featley, in a book against Anabaptists, declared that ‘none now pray by immediate inspiration’. Featley, *Dippers Dip’t* (London, 1647), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Cheynell, *The Rise, Growth, and Danger of Socinianisme* (London, 1643), p. 61.



assembly who wrote on the topic, had hard words for weak men who told ladies to marry them because of some ‘pretence of inspiration and divine revelation’.<sup>1</sup> Whether out of laziness or desperation, men should not try to push a woman a little closer to a wedding because ‘God had said’ they were meant for each other.

As Peter reminds us, we now have what we can consider to be a ‘more sure word’ from God than spoken or private utterances—we have a written word which contains prophecy (*2 Pet.* 1:19) and much more. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us of the same: Christ spoke himself and his apostles spoke on his behalf (*Heb.* 1:1, 2). What we need to know has been preserved for us. Of course God reveals himself to us in the preaching of his Word and in the administration of the sacraments. However, these ways of revelation are measured against this final and definitive word from God that we find in the Bible alone.

It remains to be said that we owe a great debt to God for these gifts of revelation. How thankful we can be that men and women and children who do not have a Bible do have a conscience! How grateful we are as we go about our day’s work or study that the very heavens declare the glory of God (*Psa.* 19:1-3)! And how much we owe to God simply because he gave his church his Word! We sometimes feel a need to reveal something about ourselves for our own sakes. God did not need to reveal himself for his own sake. He did it for us.

Let us praise him for his Word by centring our worship every week around the singing, reading and preaching of that Word which, through Jesus Christ, gives us life and hope and eternal rest.



<sup>1</sup> George Walker, *The History of the Creation as It Was Written by Moses* (London, 1641), p. 206.

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

### *Historic Text*

**1.2** Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written; are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament, which are these:

### *Modern Version*

**1.2** Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the written Word of God, are all the books of the Old and New Testaments, namely:

#### OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis	2 Chronicles	Daniel
Exodus	Ezra	Hosea
Leviticus	Nehemiah	Joel
Numbers	Esther	Amos
Deuteronomy	Job	Obadiah
Joshua	Psalms	Jonah
Judges	Proverbs	Micah
Ruth	Ecclesiastes	Nahum
1 Samuel	Song of Solomon	Habakkuk
2 Samuel	Isaiah	Zephaniah
1 Kings	Jeremiah	Haggai
2 Kings	Lamentations	Zechariah
1 Chronicles	Ezekiel	Malachi

#### OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Gospels	2 Corinthians	The Epistle to the
according to	Galatians	Hebrews
Matthew	Ephesians	The Epistle of
Mark	Philippians	James
Luke	Colossians	The first and second
John	1 Thessalonians	Epistles of Peter
The Acts of the	2 Thessalonians	The first, second,
Apostles	1 Timothy	and third
Paul's Epistles to	2 Timothy	Epistles of John
the	To Titus	The Epistle of Jude
Romans	To Philemon	The Revelation
1 Corinthians		of John

## *Chapter 1: Of the Holy Scripture*

All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.<sup>g</sup>

**1.3** 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.<sup>h</sup>

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

**1.3.** The books commonly called the Apocrypha, because they are not divinely inspired, are not part of the canon of Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God and are not to be approved, or made use of, in any manner different from other human writings.

### **Scripture Proofs**

**1.2** <sup>g</sup> Luke 16:29,31; Eph. 2:20; Rev. 22:18,19; 2 Tim. 3:16.

**1.3** <sup>h</sup> Luke 24:27,44; Rom. 3:2; 2 Pet. 1:21.

### *Holy Scripture*

The first paragraph of the Westminster Confession of Faith's first chapter reminds us that God's revelation of himself is most necessary for Christians, especially the Word of God, first spoken and later written.<sup>1</sup> These next two paragraphs discuss this written Word, informing us what Scripture is and what it is not.

Scripture is, in the first place, holy. It is sanctified, set apart from all other writings in the world. Other books contain history, poetry, and great wisdom. Other books contain great truths that are worthy of study, imitation and meditation. But there is no book like the Holy Scripture, and that is because this alone is the written Word of God. Of course no book could be written without the talents and insights that God gives to his creatures. Yet only the Holy Scripture is owned by God as his own writing.

### *A complete canon*

That writing takes the form of a small library of sixty-six books, divided into two parts. Thirty-nine of these books are found in the Old Testament, written before the time of Christ's birth, and twenty-seven are

<sup>1</sup> By the 'Word of God written' the assembly is distinguishing the written Scriptures from either spoken revelation, or, less likely in this context, from Jesus Christ as the Word of God.

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

found in the New Testament, written after the time of Christ's death and glorious resurrection.

These books are summarized in a variety of ways in Scripture. For example, the Old Testament is sometimes simply called the Law and the Prophets (*Luke* 16:16), or Moses and the Prophets (*Luke* 16:29, 31).<sup>1</sup> The list of books presented in the confession is a detailed one—the one found in the table of contents in today's Protestant Bibles, and it includes all the books that are common to Christian Bibles around the world.

Protestants understand that these books are not an anthology of works collected from a greater corpus, a mere selection from a wider number of God's writings. On the contrary, this is the total number of the books that are inspired by God and preserved for his church. For that reason, we do well to take the warning at the close of the book of Revelation and apply it to the whole of God's revelation, for who are we to add to it or take away from it? (*Rev.* 22:18, 19; see also *Deut.* 4:2).

### *An inspired book*

In speaking about 'inspired' books, the confession picks up the wording of Paul's second letter to Timothy, which states that 'all Scripture is God-breathed' (*2 Tim.* 3:16). Sometimes Christians speak of inspired authors of the Bible. And of course it is true, as Peter says, that holy men of old who wrote the Bible 'spoke . . . as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (*2 Pet.* 1:21). Certainly it is the case that Scripture is not of private origination and did not come by the mere will of man. We need to emphasize these things, and yet at the same time we need to be sure that we do not lose sight of the fact that it is the Bible itself that is inspired. This book, this Scripture alone resides with God's breath of life in it. It is perhaps for this reason that the letter to the Hebrews says that 'God's word is living and active' (*Heb.* 4:12) and Peter says that the 'word of God' is 'living and enduring' (*1 Pet.* 1:23).

If this is God's Word, then little wonder that it is to be our rule of faith and of life. Here we learn who and how to worship, who and

<sup>1</sup> The Westminster assembly also considered Ephesians 2:20 and its reference to 'apostles and prophets' to refer to old and new covenant revelation. It seems more likely that it refers to New Testament apostles and prophets.

how to trust for our salvation and all of our needs, and how to live our lives. It is for this reason that the whole Bible should be read frequently by all Christians, and should be at the centre of the Christian church. Those who ignore the Holy Scripture are doomed to stumble into ever deepening darkness. Those who embrace this Scripture, believe what it promises, and walk by its precepts, will never be without a guide or a light, and they will find their way to their Father's home.

### ***Apocrypha***

In discussing the books of the Bible we also need to say that for a variety of (ultimately inadequate) reasons, some have added to these sixty-six books other ancient writings. These books are sometimes called secondary or deuterocanonical books, later additions often imprecisely defined by the churches which use them, including the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. They were not part of the writings of Moses, the Prophets and Psalms, as Luke summarizes the Old Testament canon (*e.g.*, *Luke* 24:27, 44); they are not part of the 'oracles of God', a phrase Paul uses to describe the Old Testament in his letter to the Romans. Indeed even today they are set apart in a special section in many printed Bibles.

Additionally, some of these books hid their true date and authorship under false names or false titles—so many in fact that the entire corpus of additional books is often called the 'Apocrypha' (or 'hidden things'). These books do not carry divine authority, and are thus not part of the list, or catalogue or canon of Scripture. The confession insists here that they are not to be recommended as anything but ancient human writings. This was a strong statement by the Westminster divines contradicting the teaching of the Church of England, since its Thirty-nine Articles recommend the Apocrypha as particularly useful for 'example of life and instruction of manners', while adding that these books cannot 'establish any doctrine'. But to say this is to misunderstand the relationship between Christian doctrine and Christian living. Our life must flow from our faith. Christian piety should be a reflection of Christian theology and, if the Apocrypha cannot be useful for establishing doctrine, we should not elevate it as a guide for the Christian life.

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

It is wiser by far to use the Apocrypha as we would any other ancient book. And it is wisest of all to treasure the Holy Scripture that God has given, to heed its authority, to give it our heart's approval, and to make use of it more than any human writing.



### *Historic Text*

**1.4** The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, depends 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.<sup>1</sup>

**1.5** We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture.<sup>k</sup> 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 does 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.<sup>1</sup>

### *Modern Version*

**1.4** The authority of the Holy Scripture, because of which it ought to be believed and obeyed, does not depend upon the testimony of any man or church, but entirely upon God, its author (who is truth itself); therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

**1.5** We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to a high and reverent esteem for the Holy Scripture. The heavenly character of its content, the efficacy of its doctrine, the majesty of its style, the agreement of all its parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full disclosure it makes of the only way of man's salvation, its many other incomparable excellencies, and its entire perfection, are arguments by which it gives abundant evidence that it is the Word of God. Nevertheless, our full persuasion and assurance of its infallible truth and divine authority is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

### **Scripture Proofs**

**1.4** <sup>1</sup> 2 Pet. 1:19,21; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 John 5:9; 1 Thess. 2:13.

**1.5** <sup>k</sup> 1 Tim. 3:15; <sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:20,27; John 16:13,14; 1 Cor. 2:10-12; Isa. 59:21.

### **God's Word**

The confession begins by explaining why revelation, and especially written revelation, is necessary for God's people. It goes on to explain how the Bible is unique and holy because it is God-breathed, or inspired. In paragraphs four and five the discussion turns to the authority of Scripture, and the way in which Christians recognize that authority.

Paragraph 4 begins by reminding us that we need an adequate reason to obey and believe Holy Scripture. We must not obey the Bible simply because of the influence of other people, no matter how wise or impressive they might be as human beings. Nor is it a sure enough reason to trust the Scripture because told to do so by a church (although the Roman Catholic Church would seriously disagree with this statement!)

The only authority sufficient to command our commitment to Scripture is God himself—the one who does not lie, and who is in fact, truth itself (*John* 1:14; 14:6). This has always been the case, and yet as Peter explained to his readers in his Second Epistle, the God who has always spoken truly has now offered his people an even 'more sure word', or a 'word more fully confirmed'. That is not to say that we should have more confidence in the New Testament than the Old. Peter carefully guards against this kind of misunderstanding by looking at the phenomenon of prophecy. In prior times, God's message did not come by the mere will of the prophet. On the contrary, 'holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit' (*2 Pet.* 1:19, 21). This is true of written revelation as well, and Peter makes the link himself, telling us that this is how we are to view Scripture (*2 Pet.* 1:20). So what is Peter saying? Peter's point is that New Testament revelation is on a par with the Old when it comes to authority, but even better than the Old when it comes to clarity.

The apostle's point about authority—which is the main point discussed in this section of the confession—can be applied to his own letter: although we are reading the second letter of Peter, we are also reading a letter from God. God is the author of Scripture—a point that Paul makes with equal clarity in a letter to Timothy. In fact, there we are told that 'all Scripture is God-breathed' (*2 Tim.* 3:16). It is in this context that we are told that Scripture is 'profitable' or 'useful' for us. Since this is

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

a word from God, we are to take it as doctrine designed for our instruction; it is the divine authority of the Bible that calls us to use this book in such a way that we will be reproved and corrected by its teaching.

We receive this book because it is God's. Of course we do! After all, as the Apostle John points out, we routinely accept the word and witness of other people. And 'if we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God' is only greater (*1 John 5:9*). This was the perspective of the Thessalonians. When they realized that Paul and his company were bringing them a word from heaven, they 'received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God' (*1 Thess. 2:13*).

### *Our persuasion and assurance*

We trust Scripture because it is God's Word. But how do we know that it is God's Word? Certainly one encouragement to see it as such is the testimony of the Christian church throughout the ages. Although the church is not the edifice itself, 'the church of the living God' is, as Paul teaches Timothy, 'a pillar and buttress of truth' (*1 Tim. 3:15*). The witness over the ages from great churches and great churchmen to the reliability and authority of Scripture can certainly give us a 'high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture'. Today too, people are often drawn to read and trust the Scriptures because of the encouragement of a local church or a member of it.

An even clearer testimony to the authority of Scripture is Scripture itself. Its focus is heavenward, like no other book. Its teaching transforms. Its prose and poetry have moved men and women for thousands of years. And readers old and new continue to marvel at the weight and density of this book, and the way in which the various parts of the Bible inform and illumine each other. And this is only the beginning! Is there any other book that has so perfectly achieved its purpose of giving all glory to God? Is there another place where we can learn all that we need to know about the one way of salvation? Really, there are so many incomparable excellencies to which we could point, such overwhelming evidence of perfection, that we can only conclude that the Bible 'abundantly evidence[s] itself to be the Word of God'. In a very real sense, we can say that Holy Scripture is self-authenticating.



And ‘yet notwithstanding’ the unique characteristics, effects and message of Scripture itself, a Christian’s full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of God’s Word is actually ‘from the inward work of the Holy Spirit’. It is the Spirit who bears ‘witness by and with the Word in our hearts’. He speaks to us through the Word.

The close association of Spirit and Word was evident long ago to the prophet Isaiah, who explained how the Spirit abides with God’s Word in the speech of God’s people, from generation to generation (*Isa.* 59:21). And when the Apostle John considered the ‘unction’ or ‘anointing’ of the Holy One, who is Christ, it is clear that this anointing is the Holy Spirit. This is significant because John goes on to link this anointing or Christian knowledge with discernment of the truth, including the truth which he was writing at that moment (*1 John* 2:20, 27; *cf.* 2:21, 26).

John points out in his epistles and his Gospel that the Spirit of truth guides Christians to see, hear and receive God’s truth (*e.g.*, *John* 16:13, 14). Paul puts it another way in *1 Corinthians* 2, where he reminds us that the Spirit was given to us to reveal the deep things of God. Indeed, ‘we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God’—for the precise reason ‘that we might know’ God and his gifts (*1 Cor.* 2:10-12).

We were created to recognize truth, a gift that was misused, and then left tattered after the fall of humanity. However, God in his mercy has given us his Spirit who testifies to us as we read his Word that this is his revelation, his gift to us. The same Spirit who helps us to see Jesus as our Saviour and Lord is the one who helps us to grasp the Word of life, recognizing its authority, and trusting its promises.

It is just as Jesus said regarding the good shepherd. He speaks, and his sheep know his voice (*John* 10:11-16). Praise God that he continues to speak through Scripture, and that we are enabled to hear the voice of our good shepherd. For it is in Holy Scripture that we wonderfully discover ‘the things freely given to us by God’ (*1 Cor.* 2:12).



## CONFESSING THE FAITH

### *Historic Text*

**1.6** 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.<sup>m</sup> 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:<sup>n</sup> 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.<sup>o</sup>

### *Modern Version*

**1.6** The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory and man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly stated in Scripture or by good and necessary inference may be deduced from Scripture, unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or by traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word. We also acknowledge that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and the government of the church—circumstances common to human activities 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.

### **Scripture Proofs**

**1.6** <sup>m</sup> 2 Tim. 3:15-17; Gal. 1:8,9; 2 Thess. 2:2. <sup>n</sup> John 6:45; 1 Cor. 2:9,10,12. <sup>o</sup> 1 Cor. 11:13,14; 1 Cor. 14:26,40.

### *Scripture sufficient*

Chapter 1, paragraph 6, states the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. The idea is that if you want to know what will 'thoroughly equip' you for salvation, for faith, or for life, you will find it in Scripture (2 Tim. 3:15-17). If you want to know what God considers essential for his own glory, you will find it in the Bible. In fact 'the whole counsel [or plan] of God' concerning all these necessary things is revealed in God's Word.

These teachings are often expressly set down in Scripture. What could be plainer than God's teaching that 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (*Gen.* 1:1)? What could be clearer than the assertion of Scripture that 'there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim. 2:5)? What can give more

comfort than the promise that ‘neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (*Rom.* 8:30)? What could be more sure than Jesus’ promise that ‘the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you’ (*John* 14:26)? Scripture surely sets down what we need to know, and does so with great clarity.

The sufficiency of Scripture applies to all matters pertaining to our salvation. We need go nowhere else—we cannot go anywhere else—to find the way of salvation. This applies too for all matters of faith—all Christian doctrine is to be derived from the Bible alone. And the Scriptures are sufficient for life too, by which the Westminster assembly means that the Bible alone contains the law of God as well as all the general principles to which we need to adhere to live before the face of God. The sufficiency of Scripture for life does not deny that we need constant and extensive information and supplies from the created world in order to live. Of course we do. Scripture is sufficient in the sense that no further special revelation from God is needed to guide us through life other than the revelation graciously available to us in the Bible.

### ***Good and necessary consequence***

Nonetheless, we sometimes need to work out or deduce Christian doctrines from Scripture. We need to thoughtfully and carefully meditate on Scripture and compare its different passages. When we do that, we shall find some truths that inevitably flow from the Scripture. George Gillespie, a member of the assembly, notes that we work out from the Scriptures who should come to the Lord’s table and who should be baptized, even though the Bible does not mention either explicitly.<sup>1</sup>

God often reveals his will to us in principles and we must not modify, ignore or go beyond them. In other words, the Christian church is to heed what is expressly set down in Scripture, and equally it is to dedicate itself to what can be deduced by good and necessary consequence. And then the church is to stop.

<sup>1</sup> For the examples of the Lord’s supper and baptism, see George Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Edinburgh, 1649), pp. 243-44.

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

The Scriptures are sufficient to teach us the whole counsel of God for all things that we need to know, and at no time are we to add to them. If someone suggests that they have a new revelation of the Spirit, we are not to be rattled; in fact we can ignore it (2 *Thess.* 2:2). If someone says that there are traditions about God's glory, or about salvation, or faith, or the Christian life which we need to follow, we are not to listen to them.

In making this point, the authors of the confession refer to Paul's letter to the Galatian churches, in which he tells them to ignore even 'an angel from heaven' should he come to them with another gospel (*Gal.* 1:6-9). The teaching of Christ and his apostles is sufficient for us. Their explanation of Christianity is definitive. There is no need for further good news about salvation: the news we have could not get any better. There is no need for further doctrine: all that we need to know for the Christian faith is found in the Bible in such richness that we could mine the Scripture for our whole lives and not even begin to exhaust its treasures. There is no need for further revelation on the Christian life. From here to heaven, all that we need for every step of our pilgrimage is found in the sixty-six books of the Bible.

### ***Qualifier 1: we need the Spirit***

There are only two important things that we need to add to this by way of qualification and explanation.

First, we do not need new revelations of the Spirit, but that does not mean that we do not need the Spirit, or that he has finished his work! On the contrary, we readily 'acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God' as absolutely 'necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word'. No new truths are conveyed by the Spirit today—rather, he opens our minds to see the truths which have always been in the Scriptures, although perhaps not previously noticed by the church.

To put things in a different way, the Bible is sufficient for all our needs, but our needs are very great—for in sad fact, our sin and foolishness have left us blind and deaf to the reading and hearing of God's Word. As Paul explained to the Corinthians, our eyes do not see and

our ears do not hear ‘what God has prepared for those who love him’. For that reason it is also true that the salvation which God has prepared does not enter ‘into the heart of man’. It is the unanimous witness of the prophets and apostles that if we are going to hear the gospel savingly, we need God’s Spirit to shine into the darkness of our hearts. And so how grateful ought we to be that God in his astounding mercy does just this! He reveals his truth ‘to us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searches all things’—certainly all things concerning our salvation, faith and life as well as so much more, ‘even the deep things of God’ (see *1 Cor.* 2:9-12). We need to be taught by God (*John* 6:45).

***Qualifier 2: worship and government***

The second thing we need to say is that the perfect sufficiency of the Scriptures extends to all of life, including the church’s worship and the church’s government. Nonetheless, ‘there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church’ which are not determined by the Word.

This needs to be stated clearly. There is nothing regarding salvation, Christian doctrine, or the Christian life which is not determined by the Word of God. And even the ordering of the church and Christian prayer and praise are in a great measure directed by God—Scripture is sufficient for worship and government too!

But in worship and government God does require us to use the light of nature and Christian prudence (see 1.1 above). The very light of nature can tell us some things about the worship of God (see by analogy what Paul says in *1 Cor.* 11:13, 14). Surely we do not need special revelation to tell us that God will not be amused if we chat with a friend during prayer. And Christian prudence suggests that we find a place of worship where we shall stay dry in the rain and warm in the cold. As Paul told the Corinthians more than once, we need to do all things decently, orderly and sensibly, giving thought to each person’s edification (*1 Cor.* 14:26, 40).

Some things are simply ‘common to human actions and societies’. God tells us we must worship him. Yet, whether a congregation meets for one service of four hours or four services of one hour is a matter of

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

circumstance—we simply need to agree on it, so that we will worship together, however long or however often we meet. God shows us that we ought to have more than one elder in a church. However, we are not told if we are to have three or five or twelve. That depends on his provision and our wisdom.

What remains untouchable are the ‘general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed’. Let us give thanks for the gift of general rules, and pray for the wisdom to follow them rightly. In doing so we shall find great reward.



### *Historic Text*

**1.7** All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all:<sup>p</sup> 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.<sup>q</sup>

**1.8** 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 authentic;<sup>r</sup> so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them.<sup>s</sup> 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

### *Modern Version*

**1.7** Not all things in Scripture are equally plain in themselves or equally clear to all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly stated and explained in one place or another in Scripture, that not only the educated but also the uneducated may gain a sufficient understanding of them by a proper use of the ordinary means.

**1.8** 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 it was written was the language most generally known to the nations), being directly inspired by God and by his unique care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authoritative, so that in all controversies of religion the church is finally to appeal to them. But, because these original languages are not understood by all the people of God, who have a right to, and a vital interest in, the Scriptures and are commanded to read and search them in the fear of

them,<sup>f</sup> therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come,<sup>g</sup> that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner;<sup>h</sup> and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.<sup>i</sup>

God, therefore the Scriptures are to be translated into the common language of every nation to which they come; so that, the Word of God dwelling abundantly in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner and by perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures may have hope.

### Scripture Proofs

**1.7** <sup>p</sup> 2 Pet. 3:16; <sup>q</sup> Psa. 119:105,130.

**1.8** <sup>r</sup> Matt. 5:18. <sup>s</sup> Isa. 8:20; Acts 15:15; John 5:39,46. <sup>t</sup> John 5:39. <sup>u</sup> 1 Cor. 14:6,9,11,12,24,27,28. <sup>w</sup> Col. 3:16. <sup>x</sup> Rom. 15:4.

### The clarity of Scripture

The first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith has made statements about the necessity of Scripture, the canon of Scripture, the authority of Scripture and the sufficiency of Scripture. Here we are told about the clarity of Scripture and about texts and translations of Scripture.

Paragraph 7 begins by explaining that Bible reading is not always easy. On the one hand, certain parts of Scripture are harder to read than others. The Apostle Peter himself made the astonishing admission that ‘some things’ written by a fellow apostle were ‘hard to understand’ (2 Pet. 3:16). Actually any reader of the Bible, including one who has read the Bible for many years, knows that ‘all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves’.

On the other hand, one cannot fail to notice that we all read the Bible at different levels and so, as the confession puts it, the Scripture is not ‘alike clear unto all’. Some Christians understand the Bible better than other Christians. We are not all teachers. And we are not all seasoned saints. In fact some people have just entered the Bible for the first time. Some things they have seen, but do not yet understand. There are many doors which they have not yet entered, many corners they have yet to explore.

Given that certain portions of the Bible are demanding, especially for some people, it is important to be humble as we approach the Bible and listen to those who teach it. We must not reject an interpretation of

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

the Bible simply because it is challenging to understand, either for us, or for everyone. On the contrary, we should remember that this is God's revelation of himself, and we should not expect that everything revealed about the triune God will be easy for humans to grasp. Mapping the high points of the Bible is tiring work.

Nonetheless, what a grave mistake it would be to think that everything in the Bible was beyond us! It is not for nothing that the psalmist says once and again that God's Word is a light (*Psa.* 119:105, 130). How right the Westminster assembly was to say that 'those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation' are not beyond our grasp. Every aspect of the gospel is 'clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other'. If you are reading Ecclesiastes and you end up confused about eternal life, then by all means turn to the Gospels, to Ephesians, or to Romans! In Romans you can read that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'. In Ephesians you can read that 'by grace you are saved, through faith'. That salvation 'is not of ourselves—it is a gift of God'. And in the Gospels we hear Jesus say, 'No man has greater love than this, that he lays down his life for his friends.' And then we see what he means.

Truly, 'not only the learned, but the unlearned' can understand these things and, we might add, explain them to others. Our responsibility is to use the Word of God properly—reading it carefully and listening to it prayerfully. That is to say, we can expect the Holy Spirit's blessing, especially if we do not neglect the ordinary means by which he teaches his people. For the Spirit delights in using the preaching of the Word, the emblems of the gospel provided in baptism and the Lord's supper, and his own answers to prayer to help us understand Scripture.

### *Texts and translations of Scripture*

Paragraph 8 takes this discussion of the Bible in a different direction, first providing us with comment on the text of the Bible. Most of the inspired Old Testament, apart from a few chapters, is in Hebrew, and most of the New Testament, apart from a few words, is in Greek.

The wonderful thing is that God, who directs all of human history, preserved the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible as he



preserved no other. No other ancient texts survive in such great number and in such good form as do the biblical texts. For example, when this confession was written in the 1640s, the first-century books and letters which might have been possible contenders for inclusion in the New Testament either existed in fragments only or were missing entirely. The fact that late-dated copies of works like the Epistle of Barnabas or the Shepherd of Hermas were finally located at the turn of the twentieth century only emphasizes further the contrast between the preservation of New Testament books and other early pious literature.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, no other book in the world shows God's 'singular care and providence'—only the Scriptures. It is not the case that every ancient scribe who ever wrote a portion of the Bible was kept from error. God's providence and this text's purity are more a comment on the survival rates of manuscripts than on textual exactitude. Nevertheless we have such a carefully maintained Old Testament textual tradition, and such a large number of ancient New Testament manuscripts, that we can determine the text of the Bible and believe it with such confidence that we can actually discuss its jots and tittles, the smallest letters and pen strokes (*Matt.* 5:18). The Bible we have is authentic.

Since we have an authentic Bible, it is to its law and testimony that we must appeal, as did Isaiah (*Isa.* 8:20). We want to ensure that our views agree with the Scriptures, as was the aim in the first council of the church, recorded in Acts 15 (see verse 15). As Jesus told the religious leaders of his day, we need to both search the Scriptures and believe them (*John* 5:39, 46).

It is only sensible to add that if we are wise, it is to the Hebrew and Greek text of the Bible that we should appeal in any controversy in religion. Where else could we turn? What else could command our attention by its authority? It was the experience and then the verdict of the Westminster assembly that those engaged in deciding controversies should usually know Hebrew and Greek, and this is the main reason

<sup>1</sup> The Didache was not rediscovered until 1873. The entirety of the Epistle of Clement was only discovered in the late nineteenth century. The Epistle of Polycarp has not survived in any one early manuscript and can only be pieced together from Greek and Latin manuscripts. The major part of the Greek text of the Epistle of Barnabas was not recovered until the nineteenth century.

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

why these languages are required to be learned in solid Christian seminaries or training colleges for ministers.

Even so, as paragraph 7 quickly re-iterates, the Scriptures clearly point the way of salvation for all and sundry. Searching and believing are for everyone (*John* 5:39, 46), and that assumes that we shall all be able to read the Bible, or understand it being read—even without a working knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. In answer to ever-developing languages and the ongoing mission of the church, we are to translate the Bible into every common language. It is not often that the Westminster assembly spoke of the ‘rights’ of Christians. But the men gathered there were convinced that every child of God has an equal right to hear his or her Father’s voice. Every child of God has an interest, has something invested, in hearing and reading God’s Word. And every person under heaven has a duty to read and search the Scriptures.

This insistence on translation of the biblical text seems to capture one idea behind Paul’s corrections to Corinthian worship, for he tells them not to communicate in languages that no one can understand (*1 Cor.* 14:6, 9, 11, 12, 24, 27, 28). Hence we translate the Bible so that the Word of God will dwell ‘richly’ or ‘plentifully in all’ (*Col.* 3:16). Only then will we ‘worship him in an acceptable manner’. Only then will the words of the Apostle Paul at the end of Romans ring true for all Christians: the things written in old times ‘were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope’ (*Rom.* 15:4).



### *Historic Text*

**1.9** 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.<sup>7</sup>

### *Modern Version*

**1.9** The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself. Therefore, when there is a question about the true and full meaning of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), that meaning must be searched out and ascertained by other places that speak more clearly.

**1.10** 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.<sup>2</sup>

**1.10** The supreme judge by whom all controversies of religion are to be settled and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and claims to private revelations are to be examined, can be only the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. With his decision we are to be satisfied.

### Scripture Proofs

**1.9** <sup>y</sup> 2 Pet. 1:20,21; Acts 15:15,16.

**1.10** <sup>z</sup> Matt. 22:29,31; Eph. 2:20, with Acts 28:25.

### *The infallible rule*

Chapter 1, paragraph 9 of the confession tells us that the most important resource to help us understand the Bible is the Bible itself. In some sense, this is a very familiar rule, for we should approach any book in the world in this way. If we are trying to understand any statement by any author we need to read it in context. This is especially true if we encounter trouble in understanding a book. We assume that an author is trying to make sense and we try to see that sense when we read someone's book.

This is a very good rule of interpretation for the writings of men and women, even though human beings are not always consistent and do not always make sense. This is an infallible rule of interpretation for the Word of God. The significance of this rule is found in the fact that God is the author of every book in Scripture. Remember what Peter tells us, that 'holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost' (2 Pet. 1:20, 21). And with the Holy Spirit there is perfect consistency; with him all things make sense and cohere.

This is an important point for us to remember. Roman Catholics, with the exaggeration that often accompanies an important insight, tell us that we *need* the church to understand the Bible. Various cults tell us we need their literature. The truth is that while good guidance can be helpful in reading the Scriptures, the Scriptures themselves are clear in addressing every significant subject about which they speak. Therefore nothing must be more foundational than the Scriptures in our interpretation of them, and in our endeavour to establish doctrine.

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

In that sense we can and must stand by Scripture alone, *sola scriptura*. When there is a question about the ‘true’ meaning or the ‘full sense of any Scripture’, we need to compare Scripture with Scripture. In fact we see this procedure in the Bible itself, where the writers of inspired Scripture insist on referring to other books in the Bible. We see this again in the first council of Jerusalem, where the apostles and elders compare a battery of Old Testament texts to understand the place of the Gentiles in the early church (*Acts* 15:15-18).

And so, if we wish to search out Scripture truly, and in its fullest sense, we need to read the whole of the Bible and know it well. By doing so we shall know those places where the light of the truth shines most clearly, and then we can use those statements to understand portions of the Bible that are less clear to us, or to everyone. In that way also we shall come to an interpretation of each part of Scripture that agrees with every other part of Scripture, ensuring that we have come to an understanding of the Bible, and not a misunderstanding.

Before we leave paragraph 9, we should also note the confession’s passing comment that there are not many true and full senses of Scripture, but one. In the medieval church interpreters came to believe that it was their responsibility to find four meanings to every biblical text. This fourfold exegesis, or *quadrigo*, referred to the original meaning, a comparative meaning (which they called allegory), a moral meaning, and a heavenly meaning. Sometimes this fourfold interpretation led to a responsible treatment of Scripture. After all, some texts do have a historical meaning which is only understood properly through other passages. That same text might have moral applications and might even relate to the coming of Christ or to heaven itself. Sometimes, therefore, in the hands of the best medieval teachers, the fourfold exegesis could lead to a better interpretation of God’s Word. Unfortunately at other times this fourfold interpretation fell into the hands of less capable men and proved profoundly unhelpful. People read interpretations into the Bible rather than deriving them from the Bible. The *quadrigo* could lead to some very strange interpretations indeed!

With the Reformation there came a stress on the literal meaning of the text and the unity of that meaning, with the Reformers assigning only one primary grammatical and historical sense to each passage

according to its literary classification or genre. For the assembly's members, the interpretation of every text started here.

Nonetheless, in agreement with the saner medieval theologians, most Reformation and post-Reformation theologians did recognize that a passage in the Bible could point beyond itself. This is obviously true when the grammatical genre and historical purpose of the text made this explicit: books of the Bible use language that is figurative, prophetic or apocalyptic; authors and speakers employ allegory and parable. But it is also true that all parts of the Bible are in conversation with other parts, speaking together about the divine Author and his actions. While urging respect for authorial diversity and intent within the Bible, the Westminster assembly carefully book-ended paragraph 9 with reminders that no part of the canon of Scripture can be read in isolation from the rest. God ultimately intended sixty-six books to be read as *one* book.

### *The supreme judge*

Paragraph 10 concludes this chapter. Here the assembly repeats and expands an important point mentioned in paragraph 8; that is to say, that the Holy Scripture is the 'supreme judge' of all spiritual truths, great and small. One reason why people err, as our Lord said to the Sadducees long ago, is that they do 'not know the Scriptures nor the power of God' (*Matt.* 22:29). We need to plunder the Scriptures, for it is in them that the Holy Spirit speaks to us, as Paul tells his detractors in Acts 28:25, and it is in them that the church finds its one foundation, as it reflects on God's revelation through prophets, apostles, and most of all, Jesus Christ himself (*Eph.* 2:20).

Ask yourself: are there 'controversies of religion' that need to be settled? Then there is only one standard that is necessary for us to use, one court to which every Christian and church must appeal. Are there 'decrees of councils' that need to be evaluated? Then there is only one canon by which these councils and their decrees—including the decisions of the Westminster assembly and this confession of faith—can be authoritatively considered right or wrong. Have you or your friends encountered weighty 'opinions of ancient writers'? There is only one balance in which they can be weighed. Do we meet the 'doctrines of men' in conversation, in reading, and in preaching? There is only one light by which they can be

## CONFESSING THE FAITH

examined. Are there 'private spirits' or personal opinions in the church? Then there is only one way in which they are to be judged. There is one 'sentence' in which 'we are to rest'. And that 'can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture'.



The Banner of Truth Trust originated in 1957 in London. The founders believed that much of the best literature of historic Christianity had been allowed to fall into oblivion and that, under God, its recovery could well lead not only to a strengthening of the church, but to true revival.

Inter-denominational in vision, this publishing work is now international, and our lists include a number of contemporary authors along with classics from the past. The translation of these books into many languages is encouraged.

A monthly magazine, *The Banner of Truth*, is also published. More information about this and all our publications can be found on our website or supplied by either of the offices below.

## THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

3 Murrayfield Road  
Edinburgh, EH12 6EL  
UK



PO Box 621, Carlisle,  
Pennsylvania 17013,  
USA

[www.banneroftruth.co.uk](http://www.banneroftruth.co.uk)