

FOUNDATION AND AUTHORITY

A LAYMAN'S INTRODUCTION TO THE
WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

FOUNDATION AND AUTHORITY

*holding life and
reality together*

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Preface

THERE WERE TWO PERIODS in church history when the church made its mark and established firm foundations to the Christian faith. The first period was in the early church when the church councils formulated and articulated some of the basic and essential doctrines taught in scripture. For example: the clear teaching on the two natures of Christ, or the Trinity, or the relation of Christ the Son to God the father. Those foundational truths have sustained the church for centuries.

The second period of the 15th and 16th centuries marks the Protestant Reformation times. Confessions and creeds were developed that set forth the essentials of biblical Christianity—the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Westminster Standards were among some of those confessional documents that were expressions of the church’s commitment to Scripture and its authority. Each of the church councils and each of the confessions and creeds have brought their uniqueness to Christianity and the church; however, the Westminster Confession and Faith and Catechisms were unique not because they taught something different from the others, but of all the early council’s formulations of doctrine and later the Protestant and Reformed Confessions and Catechisms, the Westminster Confession of Faith began with a clear statement on the Scriptures. While those named above certainly reflected biblical truth, the Westminster Divines chose to begin with Scripture, even prior to its doctrinal confession about God.

While some have argued that Westminster should have started with the doctrine of God, the writers chose to begin with the infallible and inspired Word of God where we learn about God is a special and covenantal way. Without beginning with Scripture, you always run the risk of talking about the wrong god. Though God reveals himself in a general way through his creation to all of his creatures, through his Word, he especially reveals himself to us in a way that enables us to know him as he wants to be known. The Psalmist reminds us that it is not what we think about God that matters so much but rather what God tells

us about himself. To paraphrase David's words in Psalm 139: 17, "it is not my thoughts about God but God's thoughts about himself that really matters."

A second thing the WCF addresses in the opening chapter is a topic that is particularly timely today and that is who interprets Scripture? Does the author or the reader determine the meaning of Scripture? The WCF makes clear that finally and ultimately the only infallible interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself. The meaning is determined by God, the author of the text and not the reader or human interpreter, though they are part of the process. This means that the Scriptures cannot mean what we want them to mean but only what God intended to reveal to us. The words of Scripture were inspired by God therefore what Scripture says in nothing less than the word of God.

A third thing the WCF does in this opening and foundational chapter is to assure us that the words of Scripture are not simply words that men wrote which God at sometime or other may or may not choose to make alive to the reader or hearer. Though they are words penned by the human authors, they are the very word of God, not written in some mechanical dictation method but supernaturally written as God breathed out his words through men. While it is true that when we are talking about the supernatural and there are things that we will never fully comprehend, the Scriptures are given, along with the Holy Spirit, to teach us, to correct us when wrong, to instruct us in righteous living.

As we read through the WCF and its accompanying documents, one has to marvel how God used the Westminster Divines to carefully, meticulously, and thoroughly give us the system of doctrine that has become the hallmark of biblical doctrine among Christians for over 400 years.

Chapter One

OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE



CONFESSION OF FAITH

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

Of the Old Testament:

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

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Of the New Testament:

<i>The Gospels</i>	Galatians	<i>The Epistle of:</i>
<i>According to:</i>	Ephesians	James
Matthew	Philippians	<i>The First and Second</i>
Mark	Colossians	<i>Epistles of:</i>
Luke	Thessalonians I	Peter
John	Thessalonians II	<i>The First, Second,</i>
<i>The Acts of the Apostles</i>	<i>to Timothy I</i>	<i>and Third Epistles of:</i>
<i>Paul's Epistles</i>	<i>to Timothy II</i>	John
<i>to the:</i>	<i>to Titus</i>	<i>The Epistle of:</i>
Romans	<i>to Philemon</i>	Jude
Corinthians I	<i>The Epistle to the:</i>	<i>The Revelation of John</i>
Corinthians II	Hebrews	

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE WESTMINSTER DIVINES, in the opening chapter of the Westminster Confession, firmly establish the priority of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in all of the doctrines taught in the chapters that follow. In so doing, the divines emphasize the need we have for the Scriptures to be preserved and utilized just as God has given them.

They recognize the point the apostle Paul made in the opening chapter of Romans: that though the truth about God is clearly proclaimed in all that God has made and does, yet, because of sin, men are unable to benefit from this truth by coming to God in faith. Men and women need something more than God's revelation in the world around us, and God has provided his written Word as our guide for life and faith. While the Westminster Confession of Faith represents the foundation and authority of the Christian faith, the Bible is the foundation and authority for the confession.

The divines affirm the sixty-six books of Scripture as God's infallible Word written, the only place where the way to God and the way to salvation are taught infallibly. They go on to say that we are assured of this by the testimony of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by the Word in our hearts, and not merely by councils or pronouncements of fallible men or churches.

We are assured, as was the author of the Nineteenth Psalm, that the Scriptures are complete (perfect), lacking nothing necessary for God's glory or for our salvation, faith, and life. Though it contains many things difficult to understand, everything necessary for salvation is so clearly taught that even the uneducated can understand and come to God through faith, by the teachings of Scripture.

The divines further assure us that Scripture has been preserved through the ages free from human defects, in the original languages

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(Hebrew and Greek), and is available to all in the modern tongues of mankind.

They say that the infallible interpretation of any passage of Scripture is found in Scripture itself and not in the opinions of men, so the final authority in all controversies of men and religions is *only* the Holy Spirit who has spoken in Scripture.