

Studies in the Westminster Confession of Faith

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Psalm 19:1-14

The Westminster Confession of Faith was drawn up between 1643-49. Those involved in it met during a most turbulent time in English history. These were the days of Charles I, Oliver Cromwell and the English Civil War.

The initial Assembly meeting on 1st July 1643 consisted of 30 laymen [10 lords and 20 commoners] and 121 divines. There were theologians who attended from New England, such as John Cotton of Boston and Thomas Hooker of Connecticut.

On October 12, 1643, in the aftermath of the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant between England and Scotland, the Westminster Assembly was added to with Scottish representatives and subsequently received a new directive from Parliament that the divines should forthwith: *'confer and treat among themselves of such a discipline and government as may be most agreeable to God's holy Word, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the church at home, and nearer agreement with the Church of Scotland and other Reformed Churches abroad'*. The WCF sat for 5 years, 6 months and 21 days; in which time they held 1,163 sessions; with an average attendance 80-90. Their formal existence ended on 22nd February 1649.

We are coming this evening to commence a consideration of the Confession itself.

CHAPTER I - Of the Holy Scripture - Section 1 *[There are ten sections in the first chapter]*

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 inexcusable; 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.

Christianity is built upon the foundation of a divine revelation from God. Job asked the question in *Job 11:7 Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?* The simple and short answer is NO. the finite cannot search out the infinite. Therefore the infinite God must reveal Himself unto His creatures. The religion of Jesus Christ is based upon a revelation of God in Christ unto men. The Bible makes that claim for itself. The Old Testament prophets announced that they had a revelation from God for the people. Jesus Christ supported the claim of the Bible while here on earth. The apostles exercised their ministry on the same basis.

The WCF begins with the subject of divine revelation. Before it proceeds to the doctrine of the Trinity or the decrees of God it sets down what orthodox Christianity accepts and believes concerning divine revelation.

This first section of chapter one safeguards the revelation of God from a twofold attack: [1] It gives no countenance to those who deny that the existence of natural religion. There is a natural revelation. [2] It also gives no countenance to those who argue that the light of nature is sufficient to guide men to the knowledge and enjoyment of God.

There are four propositions that arise out of this section:

1. The light of nature and the works of creation and providence are sufficient to make known the fact that there is a God, and somewhat of his nature and character, so as to leave the disobedience of men without excuse.

The creation reveals there is a God, *Ps 19:1,2 The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.* The goodness, wisdom and power of God are revealed by creation, *Rom 1:19-21 Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse. Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*

Atheism is a deliberate act of the human mind. Mankind is created with the 'seed of religion' in them. He is born

a religious creature. The natural world supports this. However far back a person goes it does not provide a satisfactory explanation of the cause of their existence. A person's ancestors were no more able to make themselves than they are. A person must look up to an Eternal Being, who had no beginning but had life in Himself from all eternity and who gives life and being to all other creatures.

The works of Providence with its regular and unerring motions of the heavenly bodies for so many thousand years, the never failing return of summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, day and night, and innumerable other wonders, clearly manifest the existence of a Supreme Being, who upholds and governs all things.

It is the fool who says in his heart *there is no God, Ps 14:1*. In reality he cannot say there is no God but that there is no God for him which is somewhat different.

This natural revelation leaves all mankind inexcusable, *Rom 1:19,20*.

This knowledge of God, which is attainable by the light of nature, serves a number of useful purposes:

[1] It is a testimony of the goodness of God towards all His creatures: *Acts 14:17 Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.*

[2] As it shows men their duty, and convinces them of sin, in many points; so it has some degree of influence on mankind, at least by the fear of punishment, in restraining them from extreme degrees of wickedness, *Rom. 2:14-16 For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another. In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.*

[3] It excites men to seek after a clearer revelation of God, and prepares the way for their receiving the gospel of His grace, *Acts 17:26, 27 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us.*

[4] It serves to vindicate the conduct of God as a righteous governor, in His severe dealing with obstinate sinners, both here and hereafter. This will leave them without excuse in the great day, when God shall judge the secrets of all hearts, *Rom. 1:20,21*, and *2:15,16*. [quoted above]

2. The knowledge attainable from the light of nature is insufficient to give fallen man that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary for salvation. This is proved to be true:

[1] from the facts of history. All nations without exception who have existed without the light of the Word of God have been destitute of a knowledge of saving truth. These nations have subsequently descended into idolatry and heathenism. The heavenly bodies have been worshipped as a god along with about every creature on the earth.

[2] from the teaching of Scripture, *1 Cor 1:21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.* The learned and knowledgeable Athenians were so ignorant of the true God that they dedicated an altar to the 'unknown God'. Whatever knowledge there may be derived from nature about the Lord's power and glory, what is not discoverable by natural revelation is the remedy for sin. It may show them their sin and misery but it was never designed to show them the plain and certain way of salvation.

There is no salvation but by Jesus Christ. There is no salvation through Christ but by faith. There can be no faith created in the soul but by special revelation, *Rom 10:14-17*. Where there is no revelation the people perish, *Prov 29:18 Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.* It is the law of the Lord that converts the soul, the testimony of the Lord makes wise the simple, *Ps 19:7*.

God does nothing in vain. If natural revelation was sufficient to lead men and women to Christ then there would be no need for special revelation. God does not do things for no purpose.

If a true and saving knowledge is to be given to fallen mankind then it necessitates a special revelation from God. This we have in the Scriptures of truth.