

Studies in the Westminster Confession of Faith

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Romans 12:6

This evening we are coming to consider the last two sections of this opening chapter of the WCF. Section 9 reads: *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.* Proof Texts: *2 Peter 1:20, 21; Acts 15:15,16.*

Section 10 reads: *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.*

Proof Texts: *Matt 22:29, 31; Eph. 2:20 with Acts 28:25.*

There are two very important terms in these last two sections to take note of. One is the term '*rule*' which appears in section 9 and the other is the term '*judge*' which appears in section 10.

A *rule* is a standard for judgment. It is the standard by which all things are to be measured. A *judge* is the expounder and applier of that rule to specific cases. The judge applies the law. He doesn't make it or change it, he applies the law to the cases that are brought before him. These two sections teach that the scriptures alone are the *rule* and the *judge* in all controversies of religion.

This emphasises once again the fundamental difference between Protestantism and Romanism. To quote A A Hodge in his exposition of the Confession on this point:

The Romish doctrine is, that the Papal Church is the infallible teacher of men in religion; that, consequently, the Church authoritatively determines, (1.) What is Scripture; (2.) What is tradition; (3.) What is the true sense of Scripture and of tradition; and (4.) What is the true application of that rule to every particular question of faith or practice.

The Protestant doctrine is, - (1.) That the Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice; (2.) Negatively, that there is no body of men qualified or authorized to interpret the Scriptures or to apply their teachings to the decision of particular questions in a sense binding upon their fellow - Christians;

(3) Positively, that the Scriptures are the only authoritative voice in the Church; which is to be interpreted and applied by every individual for himself, with the assistance, though not by the authority, of his fellow-Christians. Creeds and confessions, as to form, bind those only who voluntarily profess them; and as to matter, they bind only so far as they affirm truly what the Bible teaches, and because the Bible does so teach.

This ninth section deals with the important truth of Scripture interpreting Scripture. There must be agreement in all that is taught with what is commonly called the 'Analogy of faith'. This concept is given to us in *Romans 12:6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith.* The term 'proportion' is the Greek word 'analogia' from which we get 'analogy'. It is a compound term from two words literally meaning 'in the midst of the words'. The prophesying spoken of in this text must be according to the overall system of truth as revealed by God in His Word. It must be in agreement with the 'words' already revealed. The truth of God is not revealed to prelates or popes in the Roman Church but it is revealed in the Scriptures.

Clearer portions of the Scriptures must be used to understand and explain less clear portions of Scripture. As already noticed there are some things hard to be understood in the Bible, *2 Peter 3:16 As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.*

Some things that are briefly and obscurely handled in one place are more fully and clearly explained in other places. Therefore when we would find out the true sense of Scripture we must compare one passage with another, that they may illustrate and illuminate one another. We must search the scriptures. A superficial

reading and application of the Word of God invariably leads to error in doctrine and practice. We must never take a text out of its context and seek to make it teach something that the overall system of truth does not agree with. This makes a text a pretext for personal interpretations. Doctrine must not be built upon a single verse nor solely upon a type, a parable or a figure of speech. It should never be built upon an obscure text. Neither does Scripture contradict itself. It is always consistent with itself, even though it has 40 different writers, spread over 1500 years.

This concept of comparing scripture is emphasised in *1 Cor 2:13 Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.* The thoughts in the New Testament age must agree with and be in harmony with those things taught in the Old Testament age. That which marks the teaching of the Holy Ghost in the New Testament age will be an unity with the teaching of the Old Testament.

The law of the full mention. Generally speaking the Holy Spirit expresses Himself exhaustively at some point in the Scriptures, on the great themes discussed in the Word of God. On occasions the full mention in relation to a doctrine or a subject may pertain to a whole book or to an entire chapter.

A Bible reader should look for a key book, chapter and verse on every important subject of the Bible. Usually at least two out of three of these categories are discoverable with each key theme. For example, key verses in the Old and New Testament for the doctrine of the atonement are *Lev 17:11 For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul & Heb 9:22 And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission.* The key chapter on the atonement is *Leviticus ch 16* on the offering up of the scapegoat. The key book on this theme is that of *Hebrews*.

The Virgin birth can likewise been studied in this fashion: a key text is *Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel;* the key chapter is *Luke ch 1*; the key book is *1 John*.

Man's sinfulness in the sight of God is another obvious example. One of a number of key texts is *Gen 6:5 And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually;* the key chapter is *Psalms 14*; the key book is that of *Romans*.

The tenth sections deals with the Scriptures as the supreme judge in all matters of controversy. It is not the Church or the pope or anyone else who is the final court of appeal. Robert Shaw stated the following on this point in his exposition of the confession:

That the Supreme Judge, by which all controversies in religion are to be determined, is no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture, is asserted in opposition to the Papists, who maintain that the Church is an infallible judge in religious controversies; though they do not agree among themselves whether this infallible authority resides in the Pope, or in a council, or in both together. Now, the Scripture never mentions such an infallible judge on earth. Neither Pope, nor councils, possess the properties requisite to constitute a supreme judge in controversies of religion; for they are fallible, and have often erred, and contradicted one another. Although the Church or her ministers are the official guardians of the Scriptures, and although it belongs to them to explain and enforce the doctrines and laws contained in the Word of God, yet their authority is only ministerial, and their interpretations and decisions are binding on the conscience only in so far as they accord with the mind of the Spirit in the Scriptures. By this test, the decisions of councils, the opinions of ancient writers, and the doctrines of men at the present time, are to be tried, and by this rule all controversies in religion must be determined. Isa. 8:20; Matt. 22:29.

This ends the the studies on the first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith.