

Studies in the Westminster Confession of Faith

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2 Timothy 3:15,16

We are continuing to dwell upon the opening chapter sections II & III of the WCF. They reads:

CHAPTER I - Of the Holy Scripture - Section II. 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: [The 66 books of the Old and New Testaments are then named]. All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.

CHAPTER I - Of the Holy Scripture - Section III. 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.

The WCF affirms that the canon of Scripture embraces the books of the Old & New Testaments and furthermore that the books of the Apocrypha have no place in that canon. Before we progress to consider the principles of inspiration and authority it is worth considering how the canon of Scripture was decided upon.

I. Inclusion & completion of the canon of Scripture. Which books have a place in the canon of Scripture was decided upon by an examination of the evidences which show that each of them were written by an inspired prophet or inspired apostle whose name they bear or under the supervision of one.

This evidence is the same kind of historical and critical proof as is relied upon by all literary critics to establish the genuineness and authenticity of any other ancient writings. In general this evidence is:

[1] Internal - such as language, style and the character of the subject matter they contain;

[2] External - such as the testimony of contemporaneous writers, the universal consent of contemporary readers and corroborating history, drawn from independent credible sources and the testimony of their immediate successors, who are the most competent witnesses in this case.

Learned men in the past have undertaken the task of searching the records of antiquity and have concluded that what is now accepted as the canon of Scripture was what was also received by the early Church.

One example of this is the numerous quotations which exist from the Scriptures in the writings of the earliest Christian writers and in particular the Church Fathers of the 3rd & 4th century BC. Lists of these 66 books have been found in the works of different authors from this period.

Interestingly, the Old Testament canon and books are easy to authenticate:

[1] The Jews long before the time of Christ arranged their sacred books into three groups: the Law, the Prophets and the Hagiography or holy writings. The Lord Jesus acknowledges this division in *Luke 24:44*.

The Psalms are put for the Hagiography, probably because they were the principal book of that section or occupied the first place in that division. [A Hebrew Bible has a different book order to our English Bibles.]

The Saviour by adopting this commonly accepted division of the Hebrew Scriptures ratified the canon of the Old Testament, as it was received by the Jews.

[2] Christ and the Apostles often quote as the Word of God the separate books in the Jewish Scriptures. Christ often rebuked the Jews for disobeying but never for forging or corrupting their Scriptures, *Matt 22:29*.

[3] The 39 books of the Old Testament canon were numbered by Josephus the Jewish historian and by other early Christian writers.

[4] A Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, was made over 200 years BC in which are the same 39 books that we have today.

[5] The New Testament writers quote almost every one of these 39 books and none others.

The canon and books of the New Testament are established along similar lines:

[1] The early Christian writers in all parts of the world agree in quoting, as of apostolical authority, the books we receive while they quote all other contemporaneous writings only for illustration.

[2] The early Church Fathers furnish a number of lists of the books received by them as apostolical, all of which agree perfectly as to most of the books and differ only in a slight degree with reference to some last written or least generally circulated.

[3] The earliest translations of the Scriptures prove that, at the time they were made, the books they contain were recognised as Scripture.

[4] The internal evidence corroborates the external testimony in the case of all the books. This consists of the

language and idiom in which they are written; the harmony in all essentials in the midst of great variety in form and circumstances; the elevated spirituality and doctrinal consistency of all the books; and their practical power over the consciences and hearts of people.

Reasons why the Apocrypha was rejected as forming part of the canon of Scripture:

- [1] These fifteen books never formed a part of the Hebrew Scriptures. They have always been rejected by the Jews, to whose guardianship the Old Testament Scriptures were committed.
- [2] None of them were ever quoted by Christ or the Apostles in the New Testament.
- [3] They were never embraced in the lists of canonical books by the early Fathers, and even in the Church of Rome their authority was not accepted by the most learned and candid of their theologians until after it was made an article of faith by the Council of Trent in the 16th century.
- [4] The internal evidence presented by their contents disproves their claims. None of them make any claim to inspiration, while the best of them disclaim it. Some of these books consist of childish fables and bad morals.

II. This leads on to the principles of inspiration and authority. Having settled the existence and the content of the canon of the Scriptures these two sections next deal with the topic of how we obtained the Scriptures.

The books of Scripture were written by the instrumentality of men, and the national and personal peculiarities of their authors have been evidently as freely expressed in their writing, and their natural faculties, intellectual and moral, as freely exercised in their production, as those of the authors of any other writings.

Nevertheless, these books are in thought and verbal expression, in substance and form, wholly the Word of God, conveying with absolute accuracy and divine authority all that God meant them to convey, without any human additions.

This was accomplished by the supernatural influence of the Spirit of God acting upon the spirits of the sacred writers, as outlined by Peter: *For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, 2 Peter 1:21.*

This spirit of inspiration accompanied them uniformly in what they wrote. It did not vary from writer to writer or within a writer. Without violating the free operation of their faculties yet directing them in all they wrote, and secured the infallible expression of it in words.

The nature and manner of this spirit of inspiration we cannot fully understand, no more so than in any other miracle. There is much discussion as to how this Spirit of inspiration worked.

There are high and low views of inspiration. Some believe:

1. That inspiration was a mere superintendence over the minds of the writers so as to prevent them from writing gross errors.
2. Others maintain that besides superintendence, the understanding of the writers were enlarged, that their conceptions were elevated above the measure of ordinary men and that with their minds thus elevated, they were left to their own judgment both as to matter and words.
3. The advocates of plenary [all] verbal [words] inspiration maintain that the Holy Spirit communicated to the minds of the writers not only the matter to be written but also the very words to be employed. Hence we speak of verbal inspiration.
4. A fourth view suggests that all of the above happened. At times God merely superintended the writers, at other times they were under superintendence but with their minds elevated and still at other times suggesting to the writers the very words to use, depending upon the subjects they were writing about.

The WCF holds to the third of these positions. This has been the general position of the Church down through the centuries. Verbal inspiration was not a new thing in the days of the Westminster divines.

This must be so because:

1. The Scriptures themselves claim so, *2 Tim 3:16,17.* All of Scripture, the historical as well as the moral, the prophetic as well as doctrinal, are verbally inspired.
2. There must be more than enlargement of the understanding and conception in inspiration since a great many of the things were such as could not have entered into the hearts of men or angels, had they not been revealed to the mind by the Holy Spirit. Events foretold by the writers many years before they took place and the whole of the doctrines that relate to the supernatural plan of redemption, *1 Cor 2:9,10.*