

THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF
FAITH
I. OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

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I. THE NECESSITY OF SCRIPTURE

Why do we need the Holy Scriptures?

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.

I. THE NECESSITY OF SCRIPTURE

Issues:

- While General Revelation reveals enough about God to make man's unbelief inexcusable, but does not give that knowledge of God and his will necessary to salvation.
- The Holy Scripture is “most necessary” to salvation.
- God has committed his Word to writing.
- “Prophecy” has now ceased.
 - Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb. 1:1).
 - It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Heb. 2:3-4)

2 & 3. HOW IS SCRIPTURE DEFINED?

How do we define the Holy Scripture?

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

What about the Apocrypha?

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.

2 & 3. HOW IS SCRIPTURE DEFINED?

Issues:

- We receive the Old Testament canon used during the time of Christ and the apostles.
- We receive the New Testament books received and acknowledged by the early church.
- The Apocryphal books are non-inspired intertestamental writings, granted Scriptural status by Roman Catholicism in 1546 but not accepted by the Reformers.
 - Tobit, Judith, Bel & the Dragon, Long version of Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Prayer of Manasseh, etc.
 - Not accepted by the Jews as Scriptural; written in Greek, not Hebrew; written after Malachi; “contain many things erroneous, superstitious, and immoral” (Shaw).

4. THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Why is the Bible authoritative?

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.

- Issue: Counters any claim to human authority over Scripture, and especially the Roman Catholic Church's claim that it grants Scripture its authority. Scripture is God speaking and *therefore* is authoritative.

5. THE PERSUASIVENESS OF SCRIPTURE

Why Should Scripture Be Believed?

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.

5. THE PERSUASIVENESS OF SCRIPTURE

Why Should Scripture Be Believed?

- There are many good reasons why everyone *should* believe the Bible:
 - Heavenliness of the matter; efficacy of the doctrine; majesty of style
 - The consent of all the parts; scope of the whole
 - Full discovery it makes of the only way to salvation, plus other excellencies
- Efficacy of the Holy Spirit
 - The Spirit bears testimony *by and to* the Scripture
 - We *do* believe by the Spirit's subjective and powerful work in our hearts.

6. THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

How do we rightly use the Bible?

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.

6. THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Issues:

- The Bible teaches by its express statements in Scripture.
- The Bible also teaches by its “good and necessary consequences.”
- Polemic v. “higher life” movement and Roman Catholicism
- Need for the Spirit’s illumination (and thus for prayer).
- Proper to use Christian prudence “according to the general principles of the Word” in matters like church governance, human government, and worship circumstances.

7-9. THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

Is the Bible accessible?

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. ... 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...

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.

7-9. THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

Issues:

- While not everything is equally plain in Scripture, everything necessary for salvation and godliness is clearly taught so that one can understand it without special educational qualifications.
- While acknowledging the great value of reading Hebrew and Greek, the Bible should be translated into modern tongues to be accessible to all people, and should be read by all.
- The unity of Scripture's message, due to its sole Author, allows us to compare what the Bible says in one place to clarify and illuminate what it means in another place: "the infallible rule of interpretation."

10. THE SUPREME RULE OF SCRIPTURE

Where does the Bible stand compared to all other authorities?

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.

- All other sources of truth are inferior and subordinate to God's Word.
- Christ rules his Church by his Word, the Holy Spirit still *speaking* in Scripture.
- We must appeal in disputes not merely to confessional standards but to Scripture itself.
- The Scripture ends all debate!