

SUMMARY OF WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH, CHAPTER 1: “OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE”

The reason for Scripture

“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.”

General revelation

- Truths revealed about God: Acts 14:15-17; Acts 17:24-29; Rom 1:18-23; 2:14-15
- Insufficient for salvation: 1 Cor 1:21; 2:13-14

WLC, Q. 2. How doth it appear that there is a God?

A. The very light of nature in man, and the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God; but his word and Spirit only do sufficiently and effectually reveal him unto men for their salvation.

Special revelations

Various types of special revelations (Heb 1:1-2):

- Direct speech (Adam)
- Dreams (Joseph)
- Visions (Daniel)
- Angels (Lot)
- Urim and Thummim (Aaron)
- Spirit of prophecy (Balaam)

- Theophany (Moses)
- Jesus Christ, the living Word
- Apostolic teaching (1 Thess 2:13; Heb 2:3-4)

Special revelation of the Bible

Revelation to church now committed to writing in the Bible

Benefits of Bible over other forms of revelation:

- Better for preserving
- Better for propagating
- Better certainty of contents
- Better against corruption by flesh
- Better against malice of Satan and the world

The Bible is God's revelation written to us:

OT: 2 Tim 3:14-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21

NT: 2 Pet 3:15-16

Jesus approved of OT & NT:

OT: John 10:35, quoting Ps 82:6

NT: John 16:13 ("unto all the truth")

No need for further revelation; the Scriptures are our only standard.

See B. B. Warfield, *Miracles, Yesterday and Today* (1918; more recently titled *Counterfeit Miracles*). This book shows how in church history the Christians who lived right after the apostles did not claim to experience wonderful miracles or to receive any special revelation. Rather, they sought to perpetuate the teaching of the apostles as it was in the Bible.

Compare the Westminster Larger Catechism:

WLC, Q. 3. What is the Word of God?

A. The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.

WLC, Q. 5. What do the Scriptures principally teach?

A. The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

The canon of Scripture

“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: [39 books listed]

“Of the New Testament: [27 books listed]

“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.”

The OT books have the approval of Jesus as being the word of God, which cannot err (see especially Luke 16:29-31; 24:27, 44).

The Jews of Christ’s time divided their Hebrew Bible into three parts: the law (the 5 books of Moses), the Prophets (what we call the 12 historical books, along with the 17 prophetic books), and the Writings (the 5 “Wisdom” or poetical books, the largest by far being the Psalms).

The Jewish historian Josephus lived during the first century, and he has recorded the books that the Jews accepted—the same ones in our Protestant OT.

Books of the Apocrypha, many accepted by the RC Church:

- 1-4 Maccabees
- Esdras
- Tobit
- Judith
- Wisdom of Solomon
- Baruch
- Epistle of Jeremiah
- Song of the Three Children
- Wisdom of the Son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)
- Prayer of Manasseh
- Susanna
- Bel and the Dragon
- Additions to Daniel and Esther

These apocryphal books were written in Greek after the last Hebrew book of the OT (Malachi) was written. Neither the Palestinian Jews, Jesus, nor the apostles recognized them as Scripture. Even Jerome, translator of the Latin Vulgate, rejected them.

The NT books which God inspired were received as such by the early church. Here are their authors (in order of length):

- Luke (follower and companion of Apostle Paul)
- Paul (the apostle)
- John (the apostle)
- Matthew (the apostle)
- Mark (disciple and companion of Apostle Peter)
- Author of Hebrews (perhaps Paul or one of his disciples)
- Peter (the apostle)
- James (the brother of Jesus, leader of Jerusalem church)
- Jude (another brother of Jesus)

These are the only inspired books of the NT age. The Holy Spirit guided the early church to accept the inspired books, just as he had led the Jews to accept the inspired OT books.

Note that these authors were inspired only when writing the books of the Bible.

- Note Peter in Galatians 2
- Note Paul's letter mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9

The source of Scripture's authority

“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.”

- Roman Catholic idea: The church gives the Scriptures their authority.
- Protestant idea: The Scriptures give the church its authority.

Did the church produce the Scriptures, or do the Scriptures produce the church? Answer: The Scriptures are the Word of God, and carry his authority; the Word is prior to the church. The only authority the church has is to minister and declare the word of God.

- Compare illustration of Gal 1:6-9.

Testimonies to the Scripture

“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.”

The church is to hold up the Scriptures, and encourage people to know and follow them (1 Tim 3:15).

Many evidences for the “infallible truth and divine authority” of the Scriptures:

- Heavenliness of the matter
- Efficacy of the doctrine
- Majesty of the style
- Consent of all the parts
- Scope of the whole (glory to God)
- Revelation of the only way of salvation
- Other incomparable excellencies (for example: agrees with good science, archaeology; fulfilled prophecy)
- Entire perfection

These evidences support the doctrine, but cannot prove it. Full persuasion is a gift given by God’s Holy Spirit to his elect people (1 Cor 2:10-12; 1 John 2:20, 27).

WLC, Q. 4. How doth it appear that the Scriptures are the word of God?

A. The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the word of God, by their majesty and purity; by the consent of all the parts, and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God; by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation: but the Spirit of God bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able to fully persuade it that they are the very word of God.

The Scripture’s sufficiency

“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.”

All absolute knowledge concerning faith and life is found in Scripture (2 Thess 2:2; 2 Tim 3:15-16).

- Either by direct statement (“expressly set down in Scripture”)

- Or by logical deduction (“by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture”)

Illumination is given by the Spirit to us (John 6:45; 1 Cor 2:9-12). This is not to be confused with inspiration, given only to the biblical authors.

In many cases “sanctified common sense” must be the guide (for example, 1 Cor 11:13-14; 14:26, 40). This can be assisted using “the light of nature, and Christian prudence.” Yet all these matters are under the authority of “the general rules of the word.” Human or church tradition can never equal or overcome the Scripture (Matt 15:3-6; Mark 7:6-9).

The Scripture’s perspicuity

“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.”

Not all passages are clear to all—for example, see 2 Pet 3:16. An example of an “unclear” verse might be 1 Cor 11:10.

The Scriptures are to be read and studied by everyone, not just the “experts” (Acts 17:11). They are to be taught to children (Deut 6:4-9). They are directed to the unwise as well as to the wise (Ps 119:130).

Church history has shown that those churches produce the best fruit that give the Bible to all the people in their own language.

The Scripture’s inspiration and translation

“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 authentic; 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 into 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.”

Inspiration of the autographs

The OT was written in Hebrew, with parts of Daniel and Ezra in Aramaic, a related language. The NT was written in Hellenistic Greek, the common language of most of the Roman Empire.

- Genesis 1:1, בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ׃
- John 1:1, Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος(kai. ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν(kai. θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος)

These languages were widely used by his people at the times when God gave the OT and the NT. They are not “special” languages, but were normal languages subject to God’s providence.

The Bible was “immediately inspired by God.” Here is a good definition of inspiration:

“Inspiration is a special act of the Holy Spirit by which he guarded the writers of the books of the Scriptures, so that their words should convey the thought he wished conveyed, should bear a proper relationship to the thought of other inspired books, and should be kept free from errors of fact, doctrine, and judgment.”

Inspiration applies only to the original writing, the original documents (often called the *autographs*). Copies and translations are inspired to the extent that they faithfully convey the meaning of the autographs.

Transmission of the text

Even though the autographs have been lost, by God’s providence they were carefully copied, and the copies were widely distributed. As a result, today it is possible for textual scholars to work with an abundance of material, all of which is very similar in content. We can be very confident in our Greek and Hebrew texts. There are three sources for arriving at the original text:

1. Hebrew and Greek **manuscripts**—copies that have been preserved through the centuries. The oldest one of these would be among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The oldest NT fragment is **p⁵²**, a piece of John’s Gospel dated only 35 years after he wrote his book.
2. Early **translations** of the OT and NT into other languages, such as Greek, Aramaic, Latin, Syriac, or Coptic.
3. **Quotations** of the Bible found in the writing of the early church fathers, some of whom knew the apostles personally.

Studies in these sources show that God has indeed kept his word amazingly pure throughout these centuries “by his singular care and providence.” Only in a very few places is the text uncertain, and in none of these cases is Christian truth or life at stake. The most well known disputed passages are these:

- Mark 16:9-20. Some sources (the oldest) omit this passage; others have a different, shorter ending, and one has a much longer ending. But many early translations have the common ending. This section is highly debated among scholars, but everything of importance is also mentioned in other Gospels or the Acts.
- John 7:53 – 8:11. This story of Jesus and the adulterous woman is missing from most of the early manuscripts and translations and fathers. However, many do include it. Some believe that it was omitted because early scribes did not want Jesus approving of adultery (which in this passage he does not do, v. 11).
- 1 John 5:7b-8a. This passage naming the Trinity has no support in the Greek or the fathers or the early translations. It seems to have been added to the Latin Vulgate (probably from a marginal note made to explain the text), and from there Erasmus took it into his 3rd edition of the Greek NT, which was the basis of the text used by the King James translators. When the early church hammered out the doctrine of the Trinity through three long centuries, not one church father quoted this verse. The Trinity can be proved by many other passages.

The OT has been preserved with even more care than the NT, and there is not any major passage in the OT with an uncertain text. It is important to realize that the variations found among ancient manuscripts do not negate the doctrine of the divine inspiration of Scripture, which applies to the autographs. Nor do they compromise the authority of our modern Bibles. The original text is preserved in the multitude of evidence God has given us, and can be determined for all practical purposes by careful study. It is reassuring that even the worst manuscripts teach exactly the same truths as the best manuscripts.

Translations

Translations are necessary so that all the people can read and study the Bible. This is necessary since the Bible alone is our source of authority for each individual Christian. In the tradition of the Reformation the WCF emphasizes the importance of the people having the Bible in their “vulgar language”—that is, the common language of the common people.

There are more translations of the Bible into English than into any other language. Some widespread early translations into English were those of John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, and the *Geneva Bible*, translated by English exiles in Switzerland. Here are some of the most familiar English translations in use today:

King James Version (1611), also called the *Authorized Version* (because required in the Church of England by King James I).—This has been the most widely used English translation, and still is used in many fundamental churches. Although the Greek text is old, the translators faithfully translated that text to the best of their ability. Its literary style reflects the Golden Age of Elizabethan English.

American Standard Version (1901).—This version was based on a better Greek text, and very closely translated. This is an excellent study Bible, but has never been very popular in the churches.

Revised Standard Version (1952).—This was the official Bible produced by the National Council of Churches. It generally is a fairly literal translation, but frequently shows liberal bias, especially in the OT, where it translates many prophetic passages in a way that contradicts their fulfillment in the NT. The most well-known case is in Isaiah 7:14, where it RSV has “young woman” instead of “virgin.” It has had limited use in evangelical churches.

New American Standard Bible (1963).—This is a very literal translation based on good texts. This version is popular with many evangelical churches. However, it does not have a very readable style. It is an excellent study Bible.

Today’s English Version (1966).—Also called *Good News for Modern Man*. This translation was produced by the American Bible Society. It is a good example of the so-called “dynamic” or “functional” translation. It is very readable, but sometimes seems more pedantic than necessary; for example, it substitutes the word “death” for “blood” in Romans 5:9.

New Scofield Reference Bible (1967).—This revision of the old *Scofield Reference Bible* is more moderate in its dispensational teaching. The translation used is the KJV, but this edition changes some outdated English words to agree with modern usage.

The Living Bible (1974).—Also called *The Way*. This version was written by Kenneth Taylor by paraphrasing other English translations. It is not an actual translation from the original languages, but rather a paraphrase. Its readable style has made it very popular, and the basis for translations of the Bible into other languages.

New International Version (1978).—This translation was produced by conservative scholars from America and Europe, under the International Bible Society. The NIV is based on good texts and it translated by believers. It consistently uses standard contemporary English, normally without undue paraphrase. It has become the most popular Bible among evangelical churches in America.

New King James Version (1982).—This version is an attempt to update the KJV, while still keeping the same underlying Hebrew and Greek texts as the KJV translators used, and the same general style and language. Most obsolete or archaic forms have been replaced with modern equivalents, and many verses have been translated more clearly.

New Revised Standard Version (1989).—The NRSV is an updating of the RSV, sponsored by the National Council of Churches. It is a literal translation based on good texts, but the same objections made against the old RSV still apply to this revision. This has become the standard translation used in American mainline churches. The NRSV seeks to be “gender-inclusive” more than previous translations had been.

New Living Translation (1996).—This is a new translation from the Tyndale House Publishers (who published the *Living Bible*). It is more literal and carefully translated than the *Living Bible*, done by a committee rather than an individual. It is generally fairly dynamic in its translation, and also continues in the “gender-inclusive” tradition of the NRSV.

English Standard Version (2001).—This translation is more literal than the NIV, in the tradition of the ASV of 1901. It is promoted by R. C. Sproul and his ministry.

Today’s New International Version (2005).—This is an update of the NIV, made since the NIV’s publisher was taken over by a secular company. It uses basically the same texts as the NIV, but in several places improves particular translations. However, it is very controversial because it has introduced “gender-inclusive” language into the translation in places where many scholars think it is unjustified. Several church bodies have warned against these changes, including the BPC, the PCA, and the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Scripture’s meaning

“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.”

No person can claim to interpret the Scriptures infallibly. Likewise, no church can claim to explain everything in the Bible with absolute and total certainty, and to force people to agree. The only infallible explanation of any passage can be found in other passages that explain it. For example, Ps 16:8-11 may refer to David or to the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ. Which is it? In this case an infallible interpretation is given in Acts 2:22-32, where Peter declares that it refers not to David, but to Christ.

When the Confession says “the true and full sense of any Scripture . . . is not manifold, but one,” it means that each statement of Scripture has only one meaning. While the passage may be applied in several different ways, it means only one thing to start with. This statement of the Confession opposes the Roman Catholic system of interpretation, where each passage has four meanings. It is a safeguard against allegorism and eisegesis.

The Scripture’s authority

“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 Scriptures are to judge all these things:

- Decrees of councils

- Opinions of ancient writers
- Doctrines of men
- Private spirits

The Scriptures are to settle all “controversies of religion,” as was done in Act 15:13-18 by James (controversy about Gentiles in the church), and by Jesus in Luke 20:27-40 (controversy about the resurrection).

“The Holy Spirit speaking **in the Scripture**”—the Bible alone can speak for God.

“**The Holy Spirit speaking** in the Scripture”—The Bible must be interpreted correctly, the way that God intended when it was written. The devil can misquote the Scripture, but “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16).