

WCF 01: OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

The Westminster Confession of Faith was written as a unifying creed for the use of the church. It was intended as an authoritative document. However, it was never intended to supersede the Holy Scriptures as the primary standard of the Church. The church's primary standard must remain the Scripture, while the Confession and her catechisms are to be regarded as Subordinate Standards. They are Subordinate Standards because they are derived from the Scripture in a process of exegesis and systematisation. They are authoritative in churches which subscribe to them because we believe that they are faithfully biblical, representing the teachings of the Scriptures in a systematic and unambiguous way, not contradicting it in any way, and not adding to it. That this is the intended place of the Westminster Confession in the Church is clearly indicated by the opening chapter of the Confession. The Scriptures must remain the foundational standard of the Church, even as Confessional Standard of the church is founded upon it.

Purpose and Means of Special Revelation

1.1 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 inexcusable;¹ yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation.² Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that [i.e. that which is] His will unto His Church;³ 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:⁴ which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary;⁵ those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.⁶

¹ Rom 2:14–15; 1:19–20; Ps 19:1–3; Rom 1:32; 2:1;² 1 Cor 1:21; 2:13–14; ³ Heb 1:1; ⁴ Prov 22:19–21; Lk 1:3–4; Rom 15:4; Matt 4:4, 7, 10; Isa 8:19–20; ⁵ 2 Tim 3:15; 2 Pet 1:19; ⁶ Heb 1:1–2.

- Scripture leads us to understand that God has revealed himself in two ways. Theologians speak of these two ways as 'General Revelation' (cf. Ps 19:1-6) and 'Special Revelation' (cf. Ps 19:7-14).
- Nature and the works of providence is part of God's general revelation. They not only demonstrate the existence of a God, but that He is the Living and True God by manifesting His goodness, wisdom and power (see Ps 19:1, 3; Rom 1:20). Man is therefore inexcusable, who denies His existence or refuses to seek Him. This is especially so as man is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26), and has eternity set in his heart (Ecc 3:11). There are no authentic atheists. The only way that a man can speak as if he does not believe in the existence of God is to sinfully hold down the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18).
- But nature does not reveal God completely nor does it reveal God's redemptive plan for man. This is especially since spiritual things are spiritual discerned (1 Cor 1:21; 2:13-14).
- God therefore reveals Himself specially in many ways, such as in visions and prophecies in time past (Heb 1:1). But if these were not recorded down they would be lost through the ravage of time, human weaknesses, the malice of Satan, and the influences of the world.
- Therefore to ensure that the truth is preserved and propagated, God had His words committed to writing (Prov 22:19–21; Rom 15:4; Isa 8:19–20). By the time the Holy Scripture was completed, the former ways of God's revelation to man ceased (2 Pet 1:19).
- God still speak to man by nature and providence, but no more by special revelation. This biblical assertion is corroborated by God's providence in which many so-called 'anointed Charismatic preachers' have shown themselves to be false prophets because their 'prophecies' did not "come to pass" (see Dt 18:20-22).
- We should learn to read the book of providence, but it must always be interpreted with the Scriptures rather than with superstitious fancy.

The Composition and Use of the Scripture

1.2 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: [See formatted table below] All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.¹

¹ Lk 16:29, 31; Eph 2:20; Rev 22:18–19; 2 Tim 3:16.

Of the Old Testament:

	Nomic / Historic	Poetic	Prophetic	
Pentateuch	<i>Genesis</i>	<i>Job</i>	<i>Isaiah</i>	Major Prophets
	<i>Exodus</i>	<i>Psalms</i>	<i>Jeremiah</i>	
	<i>Leviticus</i>	<i>Proverbs</i>	<i>Lamentations</i>	
	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>	<i>Ezekiel</i>	
Pre-Monarchy	<i>Deuteronomy</i>	<i>Song of Songs</i>	<i>Daniel</i>	Minor Prophets, Pre-Exilic
	<i>Joshua</i>		<i>Hosea</i>	
	<i>Judges</i>		<i>Joel</i>	
Monarchy	<i>Ruth</i>		<i>Amos</i>	
	<i>1 Samuel</i>		<i>Obadiah</i>	
	<i>2 Samuel</i>		<i>Jonah</i>	
	<i>1 Kings</i>		<i>Micah</i>	
	<i>2 Kings</i>		<i>Nahum</i>	
Post-Exilic	<i>1 Chronicles</i>		<i>Habakkuk</i>	Minor Prophets, Post-Exilic
	<i>2 Chronicles</i>		<i>Zephaniah</i>	
	<i>Ezra</i>		<i>Haggai</i>	
	<i>Nehemiah</i>		<i>Zechariah</i>	
	<i>Esther</i>		<i>Malachi</i>	

Of the New Testament:

Historical	Didactic		Apocalyptic
	Pauline Epistles	General Epistles	
<i>Matthew</i>	<i>Romans</i>	<i>Hebrews</i>	<i>Revelation</i>
<i>Mark</i>	<i>1 Corinthians</i>	<i>James</i>	
<i>Luke</i>	<i>2 Corinthians</i>	<i>1 Peter</i>	
<i>John</i>	<i>Galatians</i>	<i>2 Peter</i>	
<i>Acts</i>	<i>Ephesians</i>	<i>1 John</i>	
	<i>Philippians</i>	<i>2 John</i>	
	<i>Colossians</i>	<i>3 John</i>	
	<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	<i>Jude</i>	
	<i>2 Thessalonians</i>		
	<i>1 Timothy</i>		
	<i>2 Timothy</i>		
	<i>Titus</i>		
	<i>Philemon</i>		

- These books alone are the authoritative and sufficient rule of conduct and faith for the Christian (see Eph 2:20, 31; 2 Tim 3:16–17; Lk 16:29).
- *WSC 2*: What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him? *A*. The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.

1.3 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.¹

¹Lk 24:27, 44; Rom 3:2; 2 Pet 1:21.

- Only 66 books (39 in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New Testament) were inspired by God, and therefore these alone have authoritative use in the church of Christ.
- The Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church have added other books known as Apocrypha to their Old Testament. But 39 books in the Old Testaments were inspired by God. These 39 books appeared

in the Hebrew Canon which many believe was drawn up, or should we say affirmed, by the council led by Ezra the Scribe at about 300 B.C.

- Our Lord's use, and therefore endorsement of this canon can be seen in His speaking of the Old Testament as the "the Law of Moses, prophets and the psalms" (Lk 24:44). These three terms correspond to the three division of the Hebrew Old Testament, namely: (1) Torah (Law—Pentateuch); (2) Nebi'im (Prophets—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings & all the prophetic books except Lamentation and Daniel) and (3) Kethubhim (Writings—the rest of the books, including the poetic books, of which the book of Psalm is the largest; and Chronicles, which is the last book in the Hebrew canon).
- This canon excludes the apocrypha, which is a collection of fifteen late Jewish books, written during the period 170 B.C. to A.D. 70, some of which were included in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament commonly in used in the days of our Lord and His apostles). These books are: 1 & 2 Maccabees, Baruch, Tobit, Judith, The Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), additions to Esther, Susanna, Bel & the Dragon, 1 and 2 Esdras, Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151 and 3 Maccabees. The Roman Catholic Bible includes the first 10 of these books; while the Greek Orthodox Bible includes all 15 books.
- Our Lord makes no reference to these books, and therefore certainly did not countenance their use at all. They moreover contain theological contradictions as well as accounts that are quite clearly fictional or at least embellished versions of historical accounts.
- Accordingly, these books are "of no authority in the true Church of God." And neither should we approve of them, nor give higher regard to them than any other human writings. We, as such agree with Article 6 of the *Belgic Confession*: "All of which the Church may read and take instruction from, so far as they agree with the canonical books; but they are far from having such power and efficacy that we may from their testimony confirm any point of faith or of the Christian religion; much less may they be used to detract from the authority of the other, that is, the sacred books." We must, however, clarify that these books should never be used in public worship or for any devotional exercises.

1.4 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.¹

¹ 2 Pet 1:19, 21; 2 Tim 3:16; 1 Jn 5:9; 1 Thes 2:13.

- The Bible is not just an ancient book. It is the inspired Word of God. It contains nothing but truth for God is 'truth itself' for the ultimate determiner of what is truth is God himself. And the Bible contains the whole truth which God has determined than man should know.
- The Bible, being the Word of God, is ultimately and absolutely authoritative and so demands our absolute belief and obedience. Every believer can and must rest on its teachings, trust it utterly and depend on it fully and sufficiently for all that we need to know concerning how we may live our Christian lives (2 Tim 3:16–17, 2 Pet 1:3)
- The Bible is authoritative because God is the author, therefore no one, not even the Church, may vest it with any amount of authority. Neither should logic, archaeology and other apologetic methods be used to vest it with authority, even in an evangelistic situation.

Evidences Testifying that the Bible is the Word of God

1.5 We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverend esteem of the Holy Scripture,¹ 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.²

¹ 1 Tim 3:15. ² 1 Jn 2:20, 27; Jn 16:13–14; 1 Cor 2:10–12; Isa 59:21.

- Although there is no question that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it is helpful for us to see that there are internal and external evidences that confirm this fact to be so.

- The external evidences are secondary to the internal evidences but important:
 - (1) The testimony of the Church. The Church has through all ages, held the Scripture with high and reverential esteem, and regarded it as the Word of God. This cannot be a primary evidence since the Church can and often does err. But the fact that the Church continues to hold it as the Word of God even in her darkest days speaks of something special about it.
 - (2) The Bible has been subject to God's special care so that it has been preserved as no other writings on earth. For example, no other ancient writings have so many extant manuscripts as the NT: 24,633 in total.
 - (3) The efficacy of the doctrine contained in it. More lives have been transformed by the reading of the Bible than by any other book.
 - (4) Confirmation of archaeology and science.
- Internal Evidences
 - (1) The heavenliness of the matter. No book, religious or otherwise, is so heavenly-minded as the Bible. No where else will one find the equivalent of the parables of Christ or the Psalms.
 - (2) The wonderful discovery of the salvation plan. God's wisdom is seen throughout, and in every minute detail. Why does Christ have to be fully God and fully man, and be born of a virgin?
 - (3) The consent of all the parts. The fact that the Bible does not contradict itself at any point surely points to the Divine author. Although many have claimed contradictions in the Bible, no one has yet proven a single error.
 - (4) The Bible claims itself to be the Word of God (OT—2 Sam 23:2; Acts 4:24–25, NT—2 Pet 3:16);
 - (5) The many predictions from both the OT and NT that have been fulfilled (e.g., Ps 22:16–18; Mk 13:2).
- Furthermore, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to testify that the Bible is the infallible Word of God (1 Jn 2:20, 27; Jn 14:26; 1 Cor 2:10–12; Isa 59:21). This is the experience of all born-again believers who are walking in obedience.

Sufficiency of the Scripture

1.6a 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.¹

¹ 2 Tim 3:15–17; Gal 1:8–9; 2 Th 2:2.

- All things pertaining to man's salvation, faith and life, and the glory of God is either expressly set down in Scripture or may be deduced from what is revealed (Jn 15:15; 2 Pet 1:3). Therefore nothing is to be added to the Scripture. There are no new revelations; and traditions of men must never be seen as being on par with and be added to the Word of God (Gal 1:8–9; Rev 22:18; Deut 4:2; Prov 30:5–6).
- The Roman Catholics; cults such as Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses; and Charismatics have erred in this respect.

1.6b 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;²

² Jn 6:45; 1 Cor 2:9–12.

- Although God's revelation is complete, the work of the Holy Spirit is not done. We need Him to illumine His revealed Word to us so that we may understand and apply it into our lives (1 Cor 2:9–12). The Holy Spirit illumines not only by enabling us to connect the things that we are hearing or reading, but also by bringing to remembrance the truths that we already know (Jn 14:13, 26).

1.6c 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.³

³ 1 Cor 11:13–14; 14:26, 40.

- The Word of God has very specific instructions to regulate the manner in which we should worship God (cf. *WCF* 21.1 on the Regulative Principle of Worship) and how the church should be governed. But that does not mean that the instructions are exhaustive. The fact is: there are certain aspects of worship and church government which are left to common sense, for example: how the worship hall is to be arranged, what time the church should worship on the Lord's Day, how frequently should the elders meet to deliberate on matters, whether the deacons should meet with together with the elders, etc. In such cases, we must exercise Christian prudence, making sure that the general rules of Scripture be not violated (e.g., 1 Cor 14:40).
- There are many aspects of our life that the Scripture does not give explicit instructions, such as the choice of recreation we may engage in, and how we should organise a business entity, etc. In such cases, the principles that are found in the Scripture must be used as the basis of our decisions, together with common sense and Christian prudence. For example, in deciding whether we should engage in a particular recreation, we may ask in addition to whether it is safe and enjoyable to us: (1) Does it glorify God? (2) Is it profitable? (3) Does it edify or build up others? and (4) Is it enslaving? (1 Cor 10:31; 1 Cor 10:23-24; 1 Cor 6:12b).

Perspicuity of Scripture

1.7 All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all;¹ 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.²

¹2 Pet 3:16; ²Ps 119:105, 130.

- Not every part of the Scripture is easily understood by all. This is especially so in the Old Testament, where many find entire books, such as the minor prophets difficult to understand. But the same is true even in the New Testament. The apostle Peter found some of what the apostle Paul wrote 'hard to be understood' and that "they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction" (2 Pet 3:16).
- These difficult passages allow room for believer to grow in their knowledge of Scripture over their entire lifetime.
- That said, however, it is a matter for thanksgiving that those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation and the Christian life are clearly expressed in one part of Scripture or another, so that these verities may be sufficiently understood by all (Ps 119:105, 130).
- Even the unlearned (who knows how to read), can have sufficient understanding of God's will pertaining to these essential verities simply by reading through the Scriptures. "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple" (Ps 119:130) says the Psalmist.
- This does not, of course, deny the use of commentaries and the seeking of the counsel of more learned and matured believers such as ministers and elders.

The Inspiration of the Scripture

1.8a 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;¹

¹Mt 5:18.

- The Bible, in the original languages, was verbally and plenary inspired by God; and is therefore inerrant, infallible and authoritative.
- It is verbally inspired in that every sentence, every word, and in fact every jot and tittle in the original language is inspired by God (Mt 5:18). The process of inspiration is through the sovereign superintendence of His Spirit so that while the humanness, character and style of the inspired authors are not in any way diminished, the outcome of the result is the holy, infallible Word of God.

- It is plenary inspired in that it is wholly, not partially, inspired of God. Neither is one part of the Bible more inspired than another part (see 2 Tim 3:16).
- But how do we know that the Bible is authentic since the original manuscripts no longer exist? God, through His special providential care, has preserved thousands of hand-copied manuscripts of the biblical text. Although some of these inadvertently have transcription errors, yet not all of them err at the same positions, and so the ‘errors’ can be easily detected and corrected.
- For this reason, though many versions of the Bible are available today, the differences between the versions are really not as significant as some may make them out to be when we consider the overwhelming material agreement between them. We may liken, for example, the Authorise Version which we use to a meter ruler which we can buy off the shelf. These rulers may not be as minutely precise as the International Prototype Metre, platinum-iridium alloy bar that is kept at zero degrees in the International Bureau of Weights and Measures located in Sèvres, France. But for all intents and purpose they may be used and regarded as ‘*authentic*.’

*1.8b so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.*²

²Isa 8:20; Acts 15:15; Jn 5:39, 46.

- Since the Scripture (in the original language) is not only inspired by God, but preserved through the ages by God’s providential care, it must be the final standard of appeal whenever there is any controversy regarding the Christian faith and practice (Isa 8:20; Acts 15:15; Jn 5:39, 46).

1.8c 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,³ therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come,⁴ that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner;⁵ and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.⁶

³Jn 5:39; ⁴1 Cor 14:6, 9, 11–12, 24, 27–28; ⁵Col 3:16; ⁶Rom 15:4.

- But not everyone understands the original languages, so how can they know what it contains and do as they are commanded to, unless a translation to the vernacular language is given to them?
- Only with the Bible translated to the common language of the people, may Christians everywhere search and study the Scriptures as did the Berean Christians (Acts 17:11).

The Infallible Rule of Interpretation

1.9 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.¹

¹2 Pet 1:20–21; Acts 15:15–16.

- The Bible is inerrant in that there is absolutely no error, mistake or contradiction in it at all. This stems from the fact that God Himself is the Divine Author, and for this reason, the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself. This is known as the rule of the analogy of faith. If therefore the Scriptures gives an interpretation to a particular text, then we must not seek any other interpretation. Thus we must agree the prophet Isaiah was prophesying about the virgin birth of Christ in Isaiah 7:14 because this is the inspired interpretation given in Matthew 1:23.
- Note also the parenthetical remark that there is only one true and full sense in any Scripture text. This general rule applies in almost all parts of Scripture and must be observed when we study the Scripture. There are a few places where Scripture itself suggests that there are different levels of interpretation, particularly in the area of prophecy. An example would be Matthew’s reference to Hosea 11:1 as being fulfilled by the return of the Lord from Egypt whereunto his earthly parents had brought him to flee from the persecution of Herod. The *prima facie* meaning of Hosea 11:1 as seen in the context in the book of Hosea is about the redemption of Israel out of Egypt. But the apparently manifold meaning of these passages can easily be resolved when we understand that much of the Old Testament has a typical fulfilment in the person and work of Christ in the New Testament. That being the case, we must not only interpret each passage according to its historical, grammatical meaning; but be prepared to see the typical meaning, especially when the New Testament makes it clear that such a type is intended by the

Holy Spirit. Where a type is intended, the “*true and full sense*” of the text must include a reference to the antitype just as the ‘true and full’ description a ray of light should include a reference to the source of the light and the objects on which the ray of light falls on. But this apparent exception is generally applicable only to Old Testament passages. When interpreting the New Testament, there is no need to search for typical fulfilments.

The Authority of Scripture

1.10 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.¹

¹Mt 22:29, 31; Eph 2:20; Acts 28:25.

- The Holy Spirit inspired the Scripture; and He enables us to understand the Scripture by bringing to mind related Scripture (which we have heard or read) and enabling us to make logical connection between the passages. In this way of inspiration and illumination the Holy Spirit speaks to us in and through the Scripture.
- It is by way of the Scripture, that the Holy Spirit exercises His role as the Supreme or Ultimate Judge to settle “*all controversies of religion*”; to determine the soundness of the “*opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits* [i.e. individual believers expressing the opinions that they have arrived at on particular passage or verse of scripture].”
- We must rest upon His sentence as final. Therefore the Scripture is our final authority and appeal in all areas of doctrine and Christian life. Our Lord, who Himself is the Living Word of God, in His controversies with Satan and the Jews, appealed to Scripture (Mt 4:4, 7, 10; 22:29, 31).
- Human authorities, whether Church Fathers, popes, bishops or pastors; and human experiences must be judge against the Scriptures. Creeds and Confessions are authoritative only in so far as they are loyal to the Scriptures.
- We therefore speak of our Confession of Faith and Catechisms as the Subordinate Standards of the Church. The Scripture is the Standard. We hold our Subordinate Standards in high regard only because we are persuaded that it is a faithful interpretation and exposition of the Scripture, put together by the collective wisdom of our fathers of the faith under the providential guidance and illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, when our private interpretation of a passage or verse of Scripture, differs from the Confessional interpretation, we must never assume that the Confession is wrong. Unless we fully persuaded that our interpretation is correct after careful and exhaustive study with the corroboration of other learned and pious believers, we must give precedence to interpretation of the Confession as the voice of “the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”
- And since Creeds and Confessions are subordinate standards, we should appeal to the Scripture rather than to our Creeds and Confessions when disputing with those who do not subscribe to the same Confession, who may differ from us on particular doctrines.

—JJ Lim