

2nd Edition

*The*  
WESTMINSTER  
CONFESSIO  
*of* FAITH

FOR STUDY CLASSES



G. I. WILLIAMSON

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CONFESSION  
OF FAITH  
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Second Edition

G. I. WILLIAMSON

  
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To Grace

## Preface to the Second Edition

It is now some forty years since the late Mr. Charles H. Craig read and approved my manuscript for this book. I think he was more confident than I was that it would prove to be of use to Reformed and Presbyterian churches. That it is still useful enough to warrant a second edition, however, may well have surprised him as it has the author. My gratitude to Mr. Craig is only surpassed by my gratitude to God for allowing me to be a teacher, through this book, of so many of God's people throughout the English-speaking world.

It may surprise some that so few changes have been made. But there is good reason. I remember reading a series some years ago in the *Christian Century* magazine. Various noted clergymen of modernistic denominations told how much their thinking (and theology) had changed over the years. With me it is quite different. I believe today, more than ever before, that the doctrines set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith are true and therefore do not need to be changed. They are not, of course, infallibly stated. Only the Bible is infallible. But even today—after some 350 years—the amazing thing is that the Westminster Assembly got it so right that little needs to be changed.

It is therefore my hope that this study will continue to serve the church in these early years of the twenty-first century.

Sheldon, Iowa  
August, 2003

## Preface to the First Edition

Though office-bearers of most Presbyterian churches are still required to affirm adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith “as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures,” it can hardly be denied “that the Confession no longer holds the same place in the mind of the church as it did in the past.”<sup>1</sup> When the author was a student in seminary, he became aware of the fact that a brief statement of faith (The Confessional Statement of 1925) had virtually replaced the Westminster Confession of Faith as the creedal standard of the United Presbyterian Church of North America. Careful study of the two documents led to the author’s conviction that it was the Westminster Standard, rather than the present-day convictions of the church, which was in accord with Scripture. The conclusion was reached that the chief cause of this lamentable situation was simply ignorance of the contents of this great Confession. This in turn led to the humble effort which produced this study manual.

This manual was written in a home mission charge for the purpose of recovering with certainty and fullness the rich heritage of the Reformation faith. Whatever may be the weaknesses of this study manual on the Westminster Confession of Faith, the author can testify that a study of this Confession, as a body of doctrines provable from Scripture, has been of inestimable benefit to the faithful congregation that patiently studied—and thus helped to write—the lessons of this book. Should this manual assist others also to see that system of doctrine set forth in Scripture, all of the labors of its author will be abundantly rewarded.

1. George S. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1960), 11.



A special word of acknowledgment is due to Dr. William Young, who originally suggested that this study material be published, and to Dr. Robert L. Reymond and Dr. David Freeman for valuable suggestions regarding format and style.

Auckland, New Zealand  
July, 1964

CHAPTER

1



## I. Of the Holy Scriptures

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; yet they are 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.*

This section of the Confession teaches us (1) that God reveals himself in two distinct ways to man: in nature and in Scripture, (2) that no man can evade constant confrontation by that which reveals the living and true God (even without Scripture), (3) that all men are without excuse for their ignorant and sinful condition, and (4) that Scripture is necessary for true and saving knowledge of God because therein alone is revealed God's redemptive provision.

It has long been the habit among Christians (even of Reformed persuasion) to speak of the insufficiency of natural revelation, as if there were something defective in the revelation it makes of God. This may be seen in the traditional use of the theistic proofs.

(1) From the world as a great effect we may argue the possibility of a great cause.

(2) From the apparent order and design in the world we may argue the possibility of a designing intelligence.

(3) From the apparent rule of the world by moral law we may argue the possibility of a moral law-giver.

After these, and similar arguments, were developed and brought together, it was hoped that unbelievers might be convinced that (a) “a god” probably exists; and that (b) if he does exist, he might possibly be the God of the Bible. Only when the possibility of the existence of “God” was thus “proved” was it expected that the unbeliever would admit further evidence that might confirm that God really does exist. Observe that in this scheme the creature fixes the terms under which God must present his credentials. Facts are not allowed to say, “The true God is,” but only, “A god may possibly exist.”

What is wrong with such an approach? Simply this: every fact (and the sum total of all facts) *proves* the existence of the God of the Bible. And there is good reason. This God is. He always was. He existed before anything was made. And the whole universe exists only because he planned it. Every detail of the related aspects of existence has the precise character and purpose that God intended. It therefore has meaning that is God-given. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. . . . There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard” (Ps. 19:1, 3). Everything in heaven and earth says that the true God is, that he is glorious, that he is Creator and ruler of all, and that we are his creatures.

Man was once God’s true image. He alone among the creatures could think thoughts of his Creator. Before sinless man the whole creation (including man’s own being) was an unclouded mirror in which God could be seen with clear vision. In the mind of man God’s revelation came to self-conscious reinterpretation. It was the task of man to become conscious of all the meaning deposited by God in the universe. Man began this task (Gen. 2:19–20). He used God-given powers of investigation to

discover the true (that is, God-imprinted) meaning of nature. When Adam named something in the world of nature, he was simply reading the name (meaning) put there by God.

We must observe, however, that even before the fall of man God revealed himself in word as well as in nature. Nature revealed all that Adam needed for a right knowledge of the nature of God and the world. But how could Adam know the will or purpose of God? And how could he know what his own will and purpose ought to be? The answer is: only by special (word) revelation.

In order for man to be the image and likeness of God two things were essential. His being must be like God's, and his will or purpose must also be like God's. The being of God is not a matter of choice. Neither is the being of man a matter of choice. He is God's image. To be other than this would be to be other than human. As long as men are men they exist in God's image. It therefore follows that human existence is such as to compel the sense of deity within man. All men know God, the true God, the only God. They do not merely have the capacity for knowing him; they actually do know him, and cannot possibly evade knowing him.

However, the purpose of man is a matter of choice. As God is free to do as he will, so man (being created in the divine image) is free to do as he will. But even in his freedom of will man cannot escape the absolute control of God because the being of man (he is only an image) is wholly dependent upon God. In setting his will against the will of God revealed by the Word of God, man can only violate, but can never destroy, his dependent relationship to God. He is metaphysically God's image, although he is ethically God's likeness no longer. Man's determination to be independent of God is doomed to frustration, and he is clearly and constantly reminded of this through natural revelation. Natural revelation never ceases to declare to sinful man the fact that the true God is, and that man's very existence is wholly dependent upon God. In order to continue in rebellion against God, therefore, a man must lie to himself about the situation. He must suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). This suppression of the truth (whereby sinful men refuse to know either themselves or the true God aright) is wholly due to sin, and not in any way due to an insufficiency or defect in natural revelation.

However, the revelation of God before the fall differed from that which God has given since the fall, and this is true of both natural and special

(or word) revelation. The two forms of revelation are always coordinate. Natural and special revelation before the fall were related to, and designed to operate through, Adam's obedience. The fall rendered this revelation inoperative. Revelation now speaks in relation to man's fallen condition. Natural revelation not only declares the attributes of God (as it did from the beginning), but also reveals the wrath of God against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men (about which it did not previously need to testify, for the simple reason that there was then no unrighteousness or ungodliness of men). That natural revelation so testifies now is taught in the Bible (Rom. 1:18; 2:14–15). Certain changes were introduced in the natural order (Gen. 3:17–19) so that nature would testify to man's folly and ruin. As the regularity and peacefulness of man's original environment had testified in every way to God's goodness, so now the turmoil and violence of the environment testify that God is angry with sinners every day. This is why it is no easier for sinners to accept God's revelation in nature than for them to accept his revelation in Scripture. Natural revelation is hard for the sinner to read, not because it does not say enough, nor because it does not speak clearly enough, but because it says too much only too clearly.

Just as the test of man's obedience came by way of word revelation, so the remedy for man's present need comes by way of word revelation. Only the gospel can supplement natural revelation in such a way as to (a) disclose the means of removing God's enmity (Rom. 1:17; 2 Cor. 5:18–21) and (b) make man once more a willing subject of the will of God (Rom. 12:1–2). Therefore, it has pleased God to make such a revelation by a gradual process which is now completed, with the result that his saving Word is now deposited in the Bible. As Scripture says, (a) "God . . . at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets" and then, (b) "in these last days [has] spoken to us by His Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). The culmination came when (1) the final revelation of God "began to be spoken by the Lord," and then (2) "was confirmed to us by those who heard Him" (that is, the apostles and other eyewitnesses; Heb. 2:3). God gave this confirmation by granting the apostles power (a) to perform great signs and wonders and (b) to distribute special charismatic gifts according to his will.

It will be noted that the Confession sharply contradicts the view popularized today by the neo-Pentecostal movement. In essence this view

would have us believe that we can have the same charismatic gifts today—such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, and healing—that we read occurred in the age of the apostles. This is a very serious error. In essence it is a result of a failure to grasp the biblical teaching concerning the history of salvation. The Bible itself makes it clear that there are many things in the history of redemption that cannot, and will not, be repeated. There will never again be a universal flood, or a crossing of the Red Sea, or a virgin birth. Never again will there be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit such as took place on the day of Pentecost. The sending of the Holy Spirit is just as much an unrepeatable event as the birth of Christ was. It is for this reason that the miracles—the signs and wonders—that we read of in the Bible were not constantly occurring but, rather, centered on the major events in the process of revelation. Note, for instance, how few the miracles are in the Bible until we come to the time of Moses (the author of the first part of the Bible). Note also how the signs and wonders that we read of in the book of Acts are always associated with the presence of the apostles. For these, and similar facts, there is a reason. The reason is that these signs and wonders were given by God to attest and confirm that these men were his spokesmen. And since this process came to completion in the finished work of Christ, and the testimony of these men is now deposited in the Scriptures, the Bible alone is God's present revelation. Of this we shall see more in the sections that follow.

## QUESTIONS

1. How many kinds of revelation are there? Name them.
2. It has been imagined by some that natural revelation spoke clearly to Adam (some even imagine that he needed no word revelation before the fall), but that it does not speak clearly to us. Disprove.
3. Is there proof for the existence of God? Where?
4. What is wrong with the traditional proofs for the existence of God?
5. What are the two aspects of man's nature as the image of God?
6. Which of these could man lose?
7. Which of these was produced wholly by God?
8. Which of these was partly produced by man?
9. Was natural revelation alone sufficient before the fall? Why?
10. What does natural revelation declare *now* that it did not declare *before* the fall of man?

11. Does man still exist in the image of God?
12. What prevents men from having consciousness of the true and living God who hates sin?
13. Why must the remedy for man's condition come by special (word) revelation?
14. What is the fundamental error of the "charismatics"?
15. What was the purpose of the signs and wonders that we read of in the Bible?
16. Do we limit God when we say that these do not occur today?



## I, 2–5

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***

Genesis	I Kings	Ecclesiastes	Obadiah
Exodus	II Kings	The Song of Songs	Jonah
Leviticus	I Chronicles	Isaiah	Micah
Numbers	II Chronicles	Jeremiah	Nahum
Deuteronomy	Ezra	Lamentations	Habakkuk
Joshua	Nehemiah	Ezekiel	Zephaniah
Judges	Esther	Daniel	Haggai
Ruth	Job	Hosea	Zechariah
I Samuel	Psalms	Joel	Malachi
II Samuel	Proverbs	Amos	

### ***Of the New Testament***

The Gospels	Corinthians I	Titus	The First, Second,
according to	Corinthians II	Philemon	and Third
Matthew	Galatians	The Epistle to the	Epistles of John
Mark	Ephesians	Hebrews	The Epistle of Jude
Luke	Philippians	The Epistle of	The Revelation
John	Colossians	James	
The Acts of the	Thessalonians I	The First and	
Apostles	Thessalonians II	Second Epistles	
Paul's Epistles to the	Timothy I	of Peter	
Romans	Timothy II		

*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.*
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.*
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.*

These sections of the Confession teach us (1) that because of man's lost condition, God has revealed himself and his will through a historical process, (2) that he has for good reasons permanently inscripturated that revelation, (3) that it is now complete, (4) that it is contained in the sixty-six canonical books, and (5) that this is evident from the fact that they are inspired as no other writings are.

God's special revelation after the fall could help man only if it came with power (a) to restore him to his place as God's image-likeness (Eph. 4:23–24; Rom. 12:2; Col. 3:10); and then (b) to control and sustain him as God's image-likeness in perpetuity (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29). God's revelation, to be effectual, had to disclose redemptive information *plus* moral directives. The Scripture contains both. Redemption came in a series of acts accompanied by God's interpretation of those acts. The Old Testament records a series of God's acts preparatory to the actual accom-



plishment of redemption, along with such explanations as would advance human understanding of God's plan. The New Testament records the culminating act (the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ) and the final interpretation of it in the apostolic doctrine. When redemption was finished in *deed*, it was also completed in *word* (Heb. 1:1–2). The reason is that the completion of redemption leaves nothing more to be explained.

But why has God chosen *this means* to preserve that revelation? The answer is that this means is better than other means commonly relied upon among men. It is better than tradition, for example. And it is not only better for *preserving* the truth, but also for *propagating* it. But of this we shall see more under section 8.

A more important question at this point is this: How do we know that this book is the Word of God, and how can we be sure that only this book is the Word of God? We can be sure that this book is the Word of God because of the evidence which proves it to be. And that evidence is both internal and external to the Word of God.

A. The internal evidence is complex. We shall simply indicate in part what that evidence is.

(1) The Old Testament claims to be the very Word of God. For example, David said: "The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue" (2 Sam. 23:2).

(2) The New Testament writers readily accepted the Old Testament as the Word of God. For example: "they raised their voice to God with one accord, and said: 'Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said . . .'" (Acts 4:24–25). Or as Luke said: "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people . . . as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who have been since the world began" (Luke 1:68–70). Christ and the apostles constantly quote the Old Testament as the Word of God (Matt. 5:18; John 10:35).

(3) Christ promised to give his apostles the Holy Spirit so that they could also write the New Testament Scriptures (John 14:26). "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father,

He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning” (John 15:26–27).

(4) The apostles later received the fulfillment of this promise (Acts 2:1–4) so that the apostles could say, “Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 4:8). “These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches,” the apostle said (1 Cor. 2:13).

(5) The apostles treated each other’s writings as the Word of God, putting them on a level with the Old Testament (2 Peter 3:15–16).

(6) The Bible contains information which, in the nature of the case, could have come only from God, namely, creation and the new heaven and new earth of the future (Gen. 1–2; Rev. 21–22).

(7) The Bible contains many predictions concerning events which were later fulfilled. We shall give a few. Concerning Christ the Messiah, the most important subject of prophecy, we find predictions: (a) of the nation, tribe, and family from which he was to come (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 21:12; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; 49:8–10; Pss. 18:50; 89:4, 29, 35–37); (b) of the place of his birth (Micah 5:2) (see Luke 2:1–7); (c) that he was to be born of the virgin (Isa. 7:14); (d) that he would be a prophet (Deut. 18:15, that is, the *final* prophet), priest (1 Sam. 2:35; Ps. 110:4, that is, the *final* priest), and king (2 Sam. 7:12–16, that is, the *everlasting* king); (e) that he would be hated and persecuted (Pss. 22:6; 35:7, 12; 109:2; Isa. 53:3–9); (f) that he would ride into Jerusalem upon a lowly ass (Ps. 118:26; Zech. 9:9; cf. Matt. 21:1–11); (g) that he would be sold for thirty pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12); (h) that he would be betrayed by one of his familiar friends (Pss. 41:9; 55:12–14); (i) that he would be forsaken even by his disciples (Zech. 13:7); (j) that he would be accused by false witnesses (Pss. 27:12; 35:11; 109:2); (k) that he would not plead at his trial (Ps. 38:13; Isa. 53:7); (l) that he would be mocked, spit upon, insulted (Ps. 35:15, 21), scourged (Isa. 50:6), and crucified (Ps. 22:14, 17); (m) that his persecutors would offer him gall and vinegar (Pss. 22:15; 69:21), part his garments and cast lots for his vesture (Ps. 22:18), mock him (Pss. 22:6–8; 109:25) and pierce him (Zech. 12:10; 13:7; Ps. 22:16); not a bone would be broken (Ps. 34:20); he would die with malefactors (Isa. 53:9–12), and be buried with the rich (Isa. 53:9); (n) that there would be an earthquake at his death (Zech. 14:4); (o) that he would rise again from the dead (Ps. 16:10; Hos. 6:2–3); (p) that he would ascend into heaven (Pss. 16:11; 24:7; 68:18;

110:1); (q) that Judas would die suddenly and miserably (Pss. 55:15; 109:17); and many others could be added.

(8) The Bible, though written by many different prophets and apostles, who lived in different times and places, and under very different circumstances, customs, and the like, has never been shown to contradict itself. (Many people *say* that the Bible contradicts itself, but no one has yet proved that it does in even a single instance.)

(9) The Bible teaches a plan of salvation and a system of ethics which human wisdom could not devise. Indeed, human wisdom cannot even receive such without supernatural grace.

B. The external evidence is subordinate, but important.

(1) The Church in all ages has acknowledged the Scriptures to be the Word of God. This cannot be a primary proof since the Church can and often does err. Yet it is no small thing that the Church even in its darkest days has acknowledged that the Bible is the Word of God.

(2) The Bible has been subject to God's special care, so that it has been preserved as no other writing on earth. (For proof of this, see John H. Skilton, "Transmission of the Scriptures," in *The Infallible Word*, ed. N. B. Stonehouse and P. Woolley [Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian, 1946], pp. 137–87.) Of this we shall see more under section 8.

But if Scripture *is* the Word of God, then obviously it must possess divine authority within itself. And if it does possess within itself divine authority, then it cannot and need not depend on anything else (other than God). Authority can depend only on that which is higher than itself. The authority of man can depend on the authority of man, but only if the authority depended upon is higher. Thus the authority of an ambassador to another nation depends upon that of the secretary of state, and the secretary of state is under authority of the president (Luke 7:7–8). But God is the highest authority. The word of an ambassador may have to be backed up by that of the secretary of state. But who can back up the authority of the Word of God but God himself?

The Roman Catholic Church nowhere reveals its supreme audacity more clearly than it does here. Rome says that the Bible is the Word of God. But it also says that the certainty of this is dependent upon the testimony of the Church. Thus the Baltimore Catechism (Q. 1327) states that "it is only from Tradition (preserved in the Catholic Church) that we can know which of the writings of ancient times are inspired and

which are not inspired.” Concerning the testimony of the Bible, God’s Word, that the Bible is in fact God’s Word, a testimony found in many texts, a Roman Catholic textbook says this: “Even though these texts from Scripture are exceedingly clear, they cannot possibly be our main proof that the Bible is the inspired Word of God (F. J. Ripley, *This Is the Faith* [Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1952], p. 41). Much more important than what God says about his Word, according to Rome, is what the Church says. “The Scripture needed a guarantee of authenticity. The Church alone could give that guarantee; without the Church it cannot exist” (Ripley, p. 45). Note that Rome does not hesitate to say that God *cannot* guarantee his own Word: only man, collective man (the Church), can. What is this but to put the creature above the Creator?

Sometimes Protestants have unwittingly done this too. It has often happened in the dealing of Christians with unbelievers. The unbeliever claims that he sees nothing in the Bible to demand belief that it is the Word of God. And the believer has all too often, in effect, granted that the unbeliever has had some justification for his position. The believer may even imagine that he can find a “neutral” starting point at which he and the unbeliever are in agreement. Then, it is thought, a series of arguments can be erected on that neutral starting point which in the end might possibly prove that the Bible is the Word of God (or perhaps that it is not). Thus human reason or archaeology or history may be made the starting point, and unconsciously this starting point becomes the “higher authority” and judgment bar before which God must pass muster. This in effect makes some authority higher than the authority of God. And this cannot be done (cf. Heb. 6:16–18).

The fact of the matter is that the Bible cannot possibly be proved to be God’s Word by anything external to God himself. This does not mean that the testimony of the Church is useless. A guide who points out various masterpieces in an art gallery is of use. He does not *make* doubtful paintings into masterpieces. He does not even *prove* masterpieces to be such. But he may be the instrument by which we are brought to see the *intrinsic qualities* which make them to be masterpieces. So the Church may point out that the Bible is the Word of God. But this is possible only because it is *God’s Word*—because it already displays everywhere within itself the excellencies which belong to word-divinity. It must *be* there in order to be *seen to be* there. As John Murray puts it: “The authority of

Scripture is an objective and permanent fact residing in the quality of inspiration.” He also maintains that “faith in Scripture as God’s Word . . . rests upon the perfections inherent in Scripture and is elicited by the perception of these perfections” (“The Attestation of Scripture,” in *Infallible Word*, ed. Stonehouse and Woolley, p. 45).

However, as Murray himself asks: “If Scripture thus manifests itself to be divine, why is not faith the result in the case of every one confronted with it? The answer is that not all men have the requisite perceptive faculty. Evidence is one thing, the ability to perceive and understand is another.” As 1 Corinthians 2:14 reminds us, “the effect of sin is not only that it blinds the mind of man and makes it impervious to the evidence but also that it renders the heart of man utterly hostile to the evidence” (Murray, p. 46). It is only when God gives “the spirit of wisdom” that the eyes of our understanding are enlightened (Eph. 1:17–18). But there are some who remain “in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness” (Eph. 4:17–19). Such, of course, are utterly incapable of handling evidence, no matter how obviously divine it may be. Their devotion to “ungodliness” is such that they feel constrained to “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18).

“The two pillars of true faith in Scripture as God’s Word are the objective witness, and the internal testimony” (Murray, p. 51). The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit does not convey to us new truth content. God’s whole truth to man is contained in Scripture. The Holy Spirit so works in the hearts of the elect that in the end they react properly to the truth which is actually confronting them in the Bible.

The Barthian or neo-orthodox view, which is so popular today, maintains that the Bible “contains” the Word of God, or that it “becomes” the Word of God to the reader. But the cause of this, in the Barthian view, is not objective perfection in the Bible, but wholly a subjective activity of God in the reader. Because this view rejects the *permanent* and *inherent* perfection of the written Word of God, it really has no “Word of God” at all. To call one’s inward reaction to the Word of God the Word of God is to reject the Word of God and to enthrone the word of man. Neo-orthodoxy is really neo-modernism, and more dangerous

because it is more deceiving. The Bible must have a subjective effect on me to be of help to me, but it can be of help to me only if it is forever and inherently the infallible Word of God. All I need is to see what it already is. This is the orthodox view.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What is the “proof” that the Bible is inspired?
2. How does the Bible express the claim that it is inspired?
3. Why can’t the authority of the Bible depend on the testimony of any man or church?
4. What is Rome’s audacious claim?
5. How do Protestants sometimes subordinate the authority of Scripture to men?
6. Where must the evidence of Scripture’s divinity be sought?
7. If the evidence is there, why does not faith always result when men are confronted with that evidence?
8. When the Confession speaks of the Holy Spirit “bearing witness,” does it mean that new truth content is conveyed to the mind?



#### I, 6

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.*

This section teaches (1) that God’s finished revelation (now inscripturated) is entirely sufficient for all of man’s spiritual needs, (2) that it is sufficient

for all time (it cannot be added to), and (3) yet it is sufficient in terms of principles rather than details (leaving it to men to apply general principles according to their image function in particular instances).

The following is given in support of the Confession's teaching that the Bible is a finished product and entirely sufficient for all our needs.

Christ said that he was "the truth" (John 14:6), and we believe he embodied the whole truth (Col. 2:9). Is this not the point of comparison in the opening statement of the Epistle to the Hebrews? "God . . . at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets," but now he "has in these last days spoken to us by His Son" who is the "express image of His person." Is this not a contrast between that which was provisional and that which is final, between that which was incomplete (and therefore constantly being added to) and that which is complete (and therefore incapable of being added to)? But the truth which Christ contained within himself, he in turn, according to his own testimony, disclosed to others. "All things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). If Christ, at the time of his incarnation, could say "I have made known . . . all," then how can anyone maintain that there might be more needed before Christ returns?

Christ made a disclosure of all truth to the apostles. We see, then, that Paul could rightly claim that he had declared "the *whole* counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). "I kept back nothing that was helpful," says Paul (v. 20). Every apostle could make the same claim. How, then, could there remain anything yet to be disclosed which would be of any profit? And even if the apostles had failed to disclose to us (by means of a written record) what Christ disclosed to them, would it not be impossible for anyone but an apostle to supply the deficiency? But Paul's testimony in 2 Timothy 3:15–17 plainly indicates that there is no such deficiency, since the Scriptures are able to furnish the believer unto perfection. And if the holy Scriptures were not sufficient and finished, what would a comparison between Hebrews 10:10 (or 10:12; 7:27) and Jude 3 lead to? Can Christ's "once for all" sacrifice be added to? If it cannot, then how can "the faith . . . once for all delivered to the saints" be added to? And how could Paul in Ephesians 6:11 encourage us to "put on the *whole* armor of God" in order to "be able to stand against the wiles of the devil"? One part of this panoply is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (v.17). But if God's Word is not yet complete, how could that armor be whole?

Would it not then be defective? And if it were defective, how could we be able to stand?

Revelation 22:18–19 also teaches the impossibility of addition to the Bible. Some argue that John was merely forbidding any addition to the particular book he was then writing, namely, the book of Revelation. But everyone knows that John was the last surviving apostle, writing the final book. He was conscious of this fact. And then note the peculiar expression he uses in 22:18. The word translated “to” is not ordinarily translated “to.” It is the Greek word *epi*, which means “on, upon, or above.” It thus would indicate addition to that which was under it, or to what had gone before. If John wrote the last book, what better way to deny that anything else could be added to the whole Bible, than to deny that anything could be added on top of this book? And then, too, we might just as well argue that John forbade only this one book to be tampered with by way of subtraction. Who can imagine that John would allow us to “take away” from the words in other books of the Bible only to raise a protest if we took away from his book?

Man needs no knowledge of God’s will which is not either “expressly set down in Scripture” or deducible from Scripture “by good and necessary consequence.” The Mosaic law, for example, is not expressed by way of abstract principles. Moses declared the law in terms of concrete instances. But, as John Murray says, “these concrete instances are not to be isolated from the kind of relationship which they exemplify” (*Principles of Conduct*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957], p. 255). Even though the Ten Commandments in some cases are stated in terms of a concrete example (such as adultery as a concrete instance of sexual sin), yet they exemplify far-reaching principles. Because these principles are so all-encompassing we ought to do all (“whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do”) to the glory of God. And because each person must, as an image of God personally responsible to God, apply these principles to his own particular circumstances, it is of the utmost importance to insist upon Christian liberty (see chapter XX).

We may cite as examples of “circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church . . . which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word” such things as the place and time (on Sunday) of congregational assembly. In Acts 2:46 we read that the early Christians met “in



the temple” and also “from house to house.” That the “fair-minded” Jews in Berea who “received the word with all readiness” had a synagogue (Acts 17:10–11) is not condemned. But possession of a church building is certainly not considered as essential to the existence of a Christian church (cf. Acts 18:7). Nor is the Bible seen to prescribe a certain hour for the assembly of the congregation. Paul and Silas worshiped God at midnight (Acts 16:25). This seems to have happened also at Troas (Acts 20:7). But this was just as often not the case (Acts 16:13). The principle remained always in effect (Ex. 20:8), but the principle was carried out under varied circumstances concerning which God had not given every possible direction.

We are not at liberty to modify the principle in any degree. But we are at liberty to work out the principle according to changes in circumstances. (We may move the place of assembly from one building to another or from one hour to another, but not from one day to another.) A fire might deprive a congregation of its accustomed place of meeting. Another place would have to be selected, at least temporarily. So circumstances of divine worship would be changed by common agreement. But nothing other than the circumstances could be changed legitimately. It would still be required that the congregation meet on the Lord’s Day, and the elements of divine worship prescribed by the Bible would still compose the entire content of the exercises of that day. We see this distinction in matters of worship and government. The day of worship is ordained of God, the circumstances of time (on the Lord’s Day) and place are left to men. The content of divine worship is prescribed by God, the circumstances of the particular order are left to men. The organization of the Church with presbyteries and general assembly is of divine appointment, but the details of church order are left to circumstances. There is liberty, but only within the strict limits of the law of God laid down by way of principles revealed in the Scripture.

#### QUESTIONS

1. Cite Scripture proof that God’s Word is now complete.
2. Cite Scripture proof that God’s Word discloses all of his will for man.
3. Why is guidance given in terms of general principles rather than particular directions? (Two reasons may be given.)

4. How can the Bible suffice for all men in all times and places?
5. Give examples of things which are circumstances and things which are principles of worship and government.
6. Give an example to show that the general principles of the Word of God must control circumstances, and that the circumstances must not control (or be allowed to cause violation of) principles of the Word of God.



## I, 7

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.*

This section teaches (1) the doctrine called the perspicuity of Scripture (which literally means the “see-through-ability” of Scripture), and (2) that the unscholarly as well as the scholarly may therefore, by proper use of means, attain to a correct and saving understanding of Scripture.

It is the original lie of Satan that God, speaking in his Word, needs an interpreter to give man infallible guidance (Gen. 2:17; 3:4). This ancient error now is supreme in the Roman Catholic Church. Thus the Baltimore Catechism (Q. 1328) asks: “How can we know the true meaning of the doctrines contained in the Bible?” Answer: “We can know the true meaning . . . from the Catholic Church which has been authorized by Jesus Christ to explain His doctrines, and which is preserved from error in its teachings by the special assistance of the Holy Ghost.” Thus, while affirming that God has spoken to men in the Bible, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that God has not made clear what he means, and so above the Word of God must stand the authoritative interpretation of the Church (which, we are to presume, has an expert opinion about what God’s Word means). This also means that Rome would have us trust in the clear word of man rather than the obscure Word of God.

The Reformed faith views the matter precisely in reverse, holding that Scripture alone expresses divine truth with perfect clarity, and so regarding the Scriptures alone as finally authoritative. The interpretation of the Church (as in its creeds) must always, therefore, be regarded as less than a perfectly clear expression of divine truth, and as necessarily subordinate to Scripture. The authority of creeds is *determined by* Scripture, not *determinative of* Scripture. They have authority only if, and to the extent that, they truly are faithful to Scripture.

To say that God has spoken clearly is not, however, the same as to say that there is nothing “deep” or “profound” in Scripture. Peter reminds us that there are in Scripture “some things hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). It is not the Scriptures but some *things* in Scripture which are declared difficult to understand, and even if these things are drawn out of Scripture and correctly interpreted (or taught) by the Church, they would still be (by definition) “hard things” to understand. There is no question but that “untaught and unstable people” may, and often do, twist the hard things of Scripture “to their own destruction.” But those who will study diligently and with stability (not just with spasmodic spurts of effort) will know the truth of the deep things of God. The fact that God has spoken clearly about hard things does not make them easy. The clearest possible expression of Einstein’s theory of relativity does not make it simple. But if God *has not* spoken clearly, how can we be sure that others understand what we cannot?

The final proof for this, as for all other doctrines, must be found in Scripture. The following Scripture data are given by A. A. Hodge in his commentary:

(a) All Christians without distinction are commanded to search the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:15–17; Acts 17:11; John 5:39).

(b) Scriptures are addressed either to all men or to the whole body of believers (Deut. 6:4–9; Luke 1:3; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1, and note the opening salutation of the Epistles).

(c) The Scriptures are affirmed to be perspicuous (Ps. 119:105, 130; 2 Cor. 3:14; 2 Peter 1:18–19; 2 Tim. 3:15–17).

(d) The Scriptures present themselves as a direct divine law to be personally obeyed by men (Eph. 5:22, 25; 6:1, 5, 9; Col. 4:1; Rom. 16:2).

## QUESTIONS

1. What does “perspicuity” of Scripture mean?
2. What is the Roman Catholic doctrine on this same point?
3. Contrast Roman Catholic and Reformed views of the creeds.
4. Does the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture teach that there is nothing difficult to understand in Scripture?
5. What must the humblest as well as the most learned Christian do to understand the Scriptures? Do you think that those who complain of Scripture being too hard to understand have ever really done this?
6. How does Scripture itself indicate that God regards his Word as clear enough for all to understand?
7. What do you think are “the ordinary means” which must be duly used? (Section 9 of this chapter gives a partial answer.)



## I, 8

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 unto 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.*

This section teaches (1) what languages the original Bible was written in: namely, the Hebrew and Greek, (2) that the original manuscripts were divinely inspired, (3) that final authority resides in these original texts alone, (4) that God has preserved this text in a state of essential purity,

and (5) that this text should be translated into the vernacular for the profit of all believers.

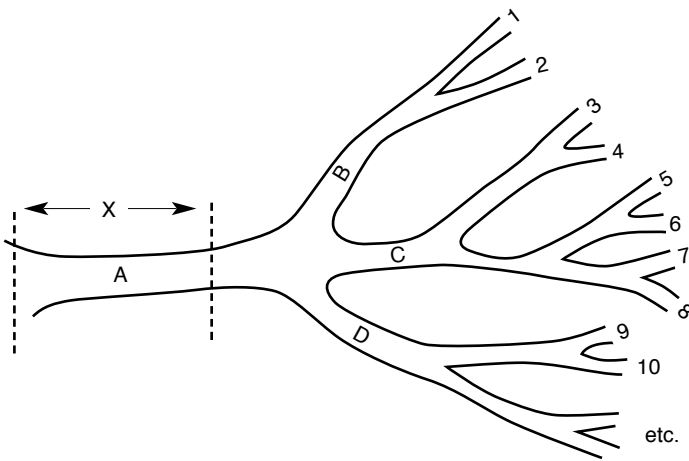
Strictly speaking, there is only *one* Bible. We commonly, but incorrectly speak as though there were many. We speak of “the Protestant Bible” and “the Roman Catholic Bible.” We speak of “the King James Bible” and “the New Bible.” The truth is that there are many versions (or translations) of the Bible. But there is only one Bible. It is that body of words which were written down in ink upon parchments or vellum by those persons whom the Holy Spirit employed as instruments through which to impart his revealed truth. The only Bible which is properly in view when we speak of “The Bible” is this *original* text deposited in the autographs of the inspired writers. This divine text was originally contained in the written form in those documents (pieces of material with Hebrew and Greek letters, words, and sentences inscribed on them). This text was, in its entirety and in every least part thereof, absolutely infallible and perfect in every way. It is to this original text that Paul refers when he says that it was “given” to us. It is to the perfection of this original text that he refers when he says that it was “given by inspiration of God,” and is therefore “profitable,” etc. (2 Tim. 3:16).

Now it must be remembered that we do not today possess the leaves of parchment or vellum upon which this divine text was first written. We do not now possess the document so inspired of God as to be perfect in every way. Making use of this fact, modernists (who disbelieve the perfection of the original text of Scripture) have long argued that Reformed Christians have no infallible Bible to which they may appeal. “What use,” they ask, “is an infallible Bible when no one possesses it?”

This brings us to the matter of God’s “singular care and providence” by which he has “kept pure in all ages” this original text, so that we now actually possess it in “authentic” form. And let us begin by giving an illustration from modern life to show that an original document may be destroyed, without the text of that document being lost. Suppose you were to write a will. Then suppose you were to have a photographic copy of that will made. If the original were then destroyed, the photographic copy would still preserve the text of that will *exactly the same as the original itself*. The text of the copy would differ in no way whatever from the original, and so it would possess exactly the same “truth” and meaning as the original.

Now of course photography was not invented until long after the original copy (or rather, manuscript, since the original was not a “copy”) of the Bible had been worn out or lost. How then could the original text of the Word of God be preserved? The answer is that God preserved it by his own remarkable care and providence. Let us illustrate this in figure 1, which shows the working of God’s providential control of the preservation of the true text of the Bible through history.

FIG. 1



In this simplified diagram the original manuscript of the Bible is represented by letter A. X represents the duration of its existence, during which time several copies (B, C, D, etc.) were made. These in turn became the basis for later copies (1, 2, 3, etc.).

Now it must be granted that while A was entirely perfect (without any error whatsoever) because of God’s immediate inspiration, yet copies B, C, D, and copies 1, 2, 3, etc., being made by uninspired persons who made mistakes common to men, were not entirely perfect. We must assume that copy B, for example, would contain very slight imperfections as compared with A (such as misspelled words, possibly a word or two left out, etc.). This same process would again be true of later copies, with this additional fact being evident: while those who made copies 1, 2, 3, etc., would make further errors of their own, they would also unavoidably transmit the mistakes already present in the copies from

which their copies were made. That is, in addition to mistakes of their own, they would reproduce all previous errors located in B, C, etc.

At first sight it would seem that with the disappearance of A (probably worn out with use) the text would be doomed to progressive corruption thereafter. But such is not the case. The reason is that God has exercised control over all the elements and agencies concerned with the preservation of the sacred text. We see that God determined that early copies of the original would be made. True, each erred in a slight degree, but they did not all err in the same points. Being human, the copier of manuscript B would make a mistake here and there. Likewise would the copiers of C and D. But they would each err in a different, individual way. So that where B erred, C and D would not err. In effect, C and D would thus bear witness against the error of B. And so, while the true (or perfect) original text would not be entirely reproduced in any single copy, yet it would not be lost or inaccessible because by the majority testimony of the several copies, error would always be witnessed against. The true text would be perfectly preserved within the body of witnesses.

The diagram shown above is, of course, simplified. Actually, there are thousands of handwritten manuscript copies of the biblical text. And it is not always easy to organize them according to their proper genealogy. But in spite of the complexity of the matter, there can be no doubt that the process outlined above has actually been operative. By a diligent study of the many textual witnesses remaining from the ancient world, by just such a process as we have sketched here, the text of the Greek New Testament stands before our eyes today with assured integrity.

The manual effort to produce copies of the text of the Bible was not operative in a vacuum, however. We must briefly note other factors controlled by divine providence which played a part in the preservation of the true text of Scripture. (1) The first churches founded outside Palestine were in the ancient world of Greek language and culture. Greek was the native language of Ephesus, Corinth, and Thessalonica. Thus the language in which Paul and the other apostles wrote was the everyday spoken language of the Christians of that era. They heard the marvelous word of God in their own tongue. This tended to produce in the company of believers a “memorized” Bible. Naturally, therefore, any errors made by copiers of the Bible would usually be noticed by the people. (Just consider how quickly you notice the differences in a new transla-

tion, when they concern some familiar part of Scripture such as the Lord's Prayer, or the Twenty-third Psalm!) Remember, too, that in a day when there were no printing presses and only a few precious copies of the Bible, the people had to memorize much more than we do today. Thus it was that especially in the Greek-speaking Church, from the very beginning, the Greek New Testament had living witnesses who helped reduce the errors of copiers to an exceedingly small amount. (2) Then, when the Reformation came, God in his providence had enabled mankind to discover mechanical means of printing. Because of this, the text of Scripture could be reproduced in thousands of copies without progressive deterioration in accuracy.

Thus, as declared by the Confession of Faith, the infallible text of the Word of God has "by . . . singular care and providence [been] kept pure in all ages," so that we do now actually possess before our very eyes the "authentic" text of the Word of the living God. We may say concerning the actual words that we see on the pages of the Greek New Testament, "Behold, these are the very words which have come forth from the mouth of God. Amen." (We may point out in closing our discussion of this section that God has similarly preserved the text of the Old Testament—through manuscript witnesses, and through the careful oversight of Hebrew-speaking Jews, who by their familiarity with the text of the Old Testament in their own language quickly detected accidental errors in copy-work.)

## QUESTIONS

1. How many "Bibles" are there (in the ultimate sense)?
2. Give the correct definition of "the Bible."
3. Do we actually possess the original manuscripts upon which the Word of God was originally written?
4. What does the modernist say about the "original, infallible Word of God"?
5. Could a copy of the infallible Word of God be as infallible as the Word of which it is a copy? Explain.
6. Were the early copies perfect?
7. What two chief factors worked to preserve the perfect text even through imperfect copiers?
8. Which of these do you believe more important?



9. Why is it no longer necessary that preservation of the true text depend on the Greek-speaking Church?
10. What is the glorious result of God's singular care and providence so far as the Scripture is concerned?



## I, 9

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.*

In this section we learn (1) that Scripture interprets itself, (2) that difficult places are clarified by the parallel passages which speak more clearly, and (3) that the sense of Scripture is one (not many).

We have already seen that Roman Catholicism and other false religions join in the denial that the Bible is God's complete revelation. They have in common the denial of the sufficiency of Scripture (against which remember 2 Tim. 3:15–17). These religions also share another characteristic, namely, the denial that the Bible is capable of being understood without reference to any outside interpreter. For example, Pope Leo XIII in 1893 declared that "God has entrusted the Scriptures to the Church," by which of course he meant the Roman Catholic Church. For this reason, he said, the Church is "the perfectly trustworthy guide and teacher," so that the true sense of the Scriptures is to be considered "that sense which has been and is held by our Holy Mother the Church, whose is the judgment of the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, so that nobody is allowed to explain Holy Scripture contrary to that sense or to the unanimous opinion of the Fathers." Obviously, under this system, it becomes quite unnecessary to read the Bible. Christ said, "Search the Scriptures!" Paul said, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). But Rome says, "God cannot speak clearly, so you must listen to me. I will make clear to you what he is trying to say!"

This same tendency may be seen in the Jehovah's Witnesses' teaching. It is well known that this religion disseminates *The Watchtower* and

other literature in an endless stream. A constant part of this stream is the *Scripture Studies*. Here is what *The Watchtower* (July 1, 1957) had to say about the comparative value of the Bible itself and the *Scripture Studies* put out by this religion:

Furthermore, not only do we find that people cannot see the divine plan in studying the Bible by itself, but we see, also, that if anyone lays the Scripture Studies aside, even after he has used them, after he has become familiar with them, after he has read them for ten years—if he lays them then aside and ignores them and goes to the Bible alone, though he has understood his Bible for ten years, our experience shows that within two years he goes into darkness. On the other hand, if he had merely read the Scripture Studies with their references, and not read a page of the Bible, as such, he would be in the light at the end of the two years, because he would have the light of the Scriptures.

Rome and the Jehovah's Witnesses sect agree in their basic attitude toward the Word of God. The psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp . . . and a light" (Ps. 119:105). But Rome and the other false religions call that light "darkness."

Against this stands the Reformed faith. As Cornelius Van Til reminds us, "No human interpreter need come between the Scripture and those to whom it comes." This view is opposed to clericalism. But "this does not mean that men who place themselves with us under the Scriptures, and who are ordained of God for the preaching of the Word cannot be of service to us in the better understanding of Scripture." Again, this Reformed stand does not mean that every portion is equally easy to understand. What it means is "that with ordinary intelligence any person can obtain" from the Word of God itself "the main point of the things he needs to know" (Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, [Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974], p. 140).

This doctrine can, of course, be abused. It is abused by those who cry "No creed but Christ!" and then ignore the great creeds of the Church. In an odd way this itself is a denial of the clarity of Scripture, for it proceeds upon the assumption that in all history no one before us has been able to see the truth contained in God's Word. It is precisely because we believe

that the Bible is plain that we value the creeds. Hence, the creeds are evidence that the Bible is clear. The creeds represent the consensus of many, who therein testified that they plainly saw the same great truth revealed in the Bible. This does not mean that the creeds are ever on a par with the Bible. They must always be kept subordinate to the word of Scripture. They cannot be regarded as infallible. That attribute belongs to God's Word alone. But because men have seen the plain truth revealed in Scripture and have expressed that truth in creedal form, the truths contained in the creeds possess a measure of authority. Precisely to the degree that they are "agreeable to and founded on the Word of God" are they useful and authoritative. But we do not go to the creeds to see if the Bible is true; we go to the Bible to see if the creeds are true. And we could not do this if the Bible was not clear and self-interpreting. In fact, creeds could not have been formulated in the first place if Scripture was not self-interpreting.

#### QUESTIONS

1. False religions deny that the Bible is God's complete revelation. What other aspect of revelation do they deny?
2. In such a religion is the Bible important or necessary to the individual believer (according to the view of that religion)?
3. Reconcile any apparent conflict between the Reformed insistence that the Bible is self-interpreting and the Reformed teaching that there are to be ministers of the Word ordained with authority to teach the Word in the churches.
4. Are all portions of the Scripture equally simple to understand? If not, does this change the fact that they are self-interpreting? Explain.
5. Why is creedless Christianity a perversion of this doctrine?
6. Why do creeds (which are agreeable with Scripture) have authority?



#### I, 10

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.*

Here we are taught that there is but one supreme judge in religious controversies, namely, the Scriptures.

This section of the Confession has to do with the application of the infallible rule of faith and practice to particular situations or questions. As we have already noted, the Roman Catholic Church maintains that it has power to interpret infallibly the infallible Word of God (the Bible) so that the faithful adherents of the Church will know in a particular situation what to believe. When the pope speaks officially, the Catholic doctrinal controversies are then settled. When the pope proclaimed the doctrine of the assumption of Mary, all Roman Catholics were then conscience-bound to believe it.

Reformed Christianity refuses to allow the conscience to be bound by anything except the infallible Word of God itself, as it interprets itself to the individual conscience of the believer. This does not mean that the truly Reformed church will remain silent on controversial matters. It means only that a truly Reformed church will make no attempt to require the conscience to bow to anything other than the Word of God. It is the task of the Church to express, set forth, or declare what the Word of God says so that the individual believer will be able himself to prove what the will of God is (Rom. 12:2). A true church simply declares the Word of God. It is not a legislative body. It does not make laws which bind the consciences of the subjects of Jesus Christ the king. It merely states the king's laws so clearly that they who fail to heed will be without excuse. (But the Roman Church claims precisely this legislative power to *make* laws for the subjects of Christ.)

This section of the Confession should be compared with chapter XXXI on Synods and Councils, especially sections 3–5. We have account of such a synod or council in Acts 15. Therein we learn how the Church ought to settle controversies ministerially on the basis of the Bible ministerially declared, rather than on the basis of new laws added to the content of the Bible. In Acts 15 we learn (1) that a controversy had arisen in the Antioch church (v. 1); (2) that a synod or council was sought in order to settle the controversy (vv. 2–3); (3) that such a synod was called (v. 4); (4) that the nature of the controversy was stated to this synod (vv. 4–5); and (5) the synod then proceeded to settle the matter (vv. 6–30). Most important is to notice how it was settled. It was settled by appeal to the Bible (or special apostolic revelations which became part of the Bible)

(vv. 14–18 etc.). When the synod came to certainty regarding the teaching of the Word of God, it was able to declare that teaching (vv. 28–29). They had not presumed to judge the matter in and of themselves, but had in every way acknowledged the Scripture as supreme judge. It is true that the synod expected the churches to receive the declaration with reverence and submission (vv. 28–29), but this was expected because said declaration was consonant with the Word of God. It was the Word of God declared which had the authority, and not the synod apart from that Word.

When a synod makes a declaration “apart from the Word of God” it is without divine authority. An example is provided by the 1934 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA. This decision declared that it was the solemn obligation of every member of that denomination to contribute money to the support of the mission boards of the church even though there were, at that very time, modernists (who denied the very faith of the church) serving under the boards. The Assembly said that the obligation to support the mission boards was as definite as the obligation to observe the Lord’s Supper. J. Gresham Machen and others refused to obey this mandate on the grounds that a synod cannot require as a duty what is contrary to the Bible. In rejecting the error of the highest court of the church Machen and others appealed to the supreme authority, which is the holy Scriptures.

Synods and councils (or general assemblies) may err. Many have erred. They are therefore never to be made the rule of faith and practice, but only to be used as a help to a proper observance of the rule of faith and practice which is the Bible. In a truly Reformed church there will be, and ought to be, frequent synodical declarations. But any member (or lower court) of the church will be, and ought to be, free to dissent from the declarations of the synod, provided he does so on the ground of appeal to the higher authority of the Word of God. (Of this we shall have more to say in our discussion of chapter XXXI.)

## QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches with regard to the supreme judge in matters of religious controversy?

2. Can the Church speak infallibly? If not, then how can it speak with authority or value?
3. In the Synod of Jerusalem did Peter act as pope? Who made the decision? Upon what was this decision based?
4. Can you cite Scripture (a) to prove that it is the duty of believers to partake of the Lord's Supper? and (b) to prove that it is the duty of believers not to support "missionary" work performed by modernist unbelievers?

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