Did God Really Say?

Affirming the Truthfulness and Trustworthiness of Scripture

Edited by DAVID B. GARNER

"These writers identify fundamental issues and bring clarity."
–D. A. CARSON

Foreword by Robert C. (Ric) Cannada Jr., Bryan Chapell, and Peter A. Lillback

"*Did God Really Say?* engages the discussion of the doctrine of Scripture, offering keen and relevant insight into its current issues. The ideas presented are paramount to the church and will be of particular benefit to those seeking to defend the doctrine of Scripture."

—**Alistair Begg**, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

"Current discussion about the nature of Scripture circles around a plethora of topics, each of them painfully complicated. Here a handful of scholars tackle seven of them—including the nature and development of the canon, the place of Warfield, God's relation to language, and the views of N. T. Wright. With firmness and fairness, not to say remarkable simplicity, these writers identify the fundamental issues and bring clarity to their joyful confessionalism."

—**D. A. Carson**, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois

"The appearance of this volume is most welcome. At a time of increasing doctrinal imprecision and indifference, with all-too-evident disastrous practical consequences for the life of the church and its mission, its authors uniformly address issues related to Scripture's nature, authority, sufficiency, and clarity in ways that are timely and beneficial. I commend it highly for a broad audience."

—**Richard B. Gaffin Jr.**, Professor Emeritus of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia

"In every generation the church has to rearticulate its confidence in Scripture. From our first parents in the garden to our Savior in the wilderness to the apostle's charge to Timothy, the issue has been the same: 'Did God really say?' How we answer that question will affect—for better or worse—the health of the church, our witness to the world, and the state of our souls. This book does not dodge the bullets or sound an uncertain note. Rather, it clearly and convincingly restates the historical and biblical account of Scripture's most basic claim to be God's Word written."

—**Liam Goligher**, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

"The contributors who have given us this volume are committed not only to high academic integrity, but also to the highest view of Scripture. . . . They patiently and clearly set out the truths and principles that not only have upheld the Bible through the centuries but also have preserved the church in her devotion to Christ."

—**Mark G. Johnston**, Senior Pastor, Proclamation Presbyterian Church, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

"The authors believe that the authority of God's Word is derived from the Word itself. They hold that the church doctrine of divine inspiration is a faithful summary of what the Bible teaches regarding its own inspiration. They are not content merely to articulate the doctrine; they call the church to follow its implications by bowing in the dust before the authority of God's inerrant Word."

—**David B. McWilliams**, Senior Minister, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Lakeland, Florida

"Dr. David Garner has wonderfully given us a volume that appropriately affirms, defends, and defines the reliability and sufficiency of God's Word, and at the same time equips the reader not only to profit from the Word of God but also to defend its priority and integrity. I invite you to savor every page in this book."

—**Harry Reeder**, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

"Just when the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture seemed matters of agreement among conservative theologians, along comes a new day that calls everything into question again. . . . *Did God Really Say?* clears away the rubble of contemporary error and prejudice, making way for clear thinking and orthodox confession on an issue of vital importance. Nothing could be more crucial for our times, and we are in their debt."

—**Derek W. H. Thomas**, Minister of Preaching and Teaching, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Distinguished Visiting Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

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To my parents,
who love the Word of God

"I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word." (Ps. 138:2)

Contents

Foreword

THE THEOLOGY of the twenty-first-century global church is being fashioned with tools forged in what has been termed a "hyper-hermeneutical age." Thus, theologians, pastors, and laity experience a whirling world of disparate meanings and divided commitments. Seminaries and congregations alike inhabit this world of garbled communication, which enters its greatest confusion when discussions turn to ultimate concerns, especially the nature of Holy Scripture.

Accordingly, we are no longer surprised that Protestant leaders, even if calling themselves evangelicals, project creaturely limitations onto the Scriptures. The theological and hermeneutical (interpretive) principles employed reflect the self-absorbed logic of postmodernity:

- If we cannot understand our contemporaries' views and commitments, how much less can we understand the ancient Scriptures?
- Since the Scriptures are human writings, don't they possess the limitations of all other human communications?
- Aren't these limitations exacerbated by the historical anomalies of time and space?
- Don't human cultural concerns and self-interests overshadow or even dominate whatever inescapable authorial intent the Scriptures may present?

- Even if the Scriptures are the Word of God, how can mere finite creatures, especially untutored laypeople, possibly apprehend the transcendent mind of God cloaked in such obscure texts?

The results of the convergence of such perspectives with modern higher critical methodology and postmodern individualistic relativity are clear. The Bible is a book no longer suitable for the laity. Instead, a higher class is required, namely, scholars who are the sole legitimate interpreters of Scripture. Some have gone further and claimed that the Bible is a book without any definite meaning, since everyone's interpretive view of Scripture has an equal claim to the truth. In reaction to this claim, others have asserted that the proper posture of a contemporary viable faith in the message of the Scriptures is retreat into a secret meeting of shared discourse among specialists that defines the meaning of Scripture for its readers.

How different all of this is from the bold call of the Reformation's *sola Scriptura* and its attendant doctrine of the inherent clarity of Scripture! The first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith, "Of the Holy Scripture," well summarizes this historical viewpoint: the Scriptures are necessary,[1] inspired,[2] authoritative,[3]

1. "It pleased the Lord, . . . 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" (WCF 1.1). "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" (WCF 1.6).

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. . . . All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life" (WCF 1.2).

3. "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" (WCF 1.4).

infallible,[4] perspicuous (clear),[5] translatable,[6] self-interpreting,[7] and the very voice of the Holy Spirit.[8] Indeed, the Scriptures as the Word of God not only are infallible ("infallible truth and divine authority thereof")[9] but also present an infallible hermeneutic ("the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself").[10] The Spirit who indwells us to receive and understand God's Word is the same Spirit who inspired it. Thus, the Scriptures are truly clear in their central message—even to the laity:

> 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

4. "We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture . . . 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" (WCF 1.5).

5. "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" (WCF 1.7).

6. "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" (WCF 1.8).

7. "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" (WCF 1.9).

8. "The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined . . . can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture" (WCF 1.10).

9. WCF 1.5.

10. WCF 1.9.

> the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.[11]

The Reformation's commitment to *sola Scriptura* was a call to biblical authority and to a biblically defined hermeneutic that resulted in a biblically clear message. This message is the saving work of Christ: "those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation."[12] Thus, the infallible Word when interpreted by its own infallible hermeneutic leads to the clear and saving truth captured by another great Reformation motto: *solus Christus*. The incarnate Word is discovered in the inspired and written Word. While not all of Scripture is equally clear ("all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all"),[13] the glorious redemptive grace found in Jesus Christ is clear even to the untrained student of Scripture ("not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them").[14]

Thus, it is with sincere gratitude that we recommend to you *Did God Really Say?* and its articles written by scholars from each of the seminaries that we lead. For the sake of the church, these studies present the historically Reformed understanding of the objective and inherent clarity and certainty of the Word of God. Yet they do so while being fully aware of the contemporary milieu of the subjective confusion surrounding so much of recent biblical hermeneutics. The authors are accomplished scholars, and their common concerns reflect the foundational unity of a Christ-centered biblical hermeneutic. This unity stands in spite of their distinctive disciplines and their respective seminary traditions (Westminster, Covenant, Reformed).

11. WCF 1.7.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

May Christ's church and Christ's people be strengthened and sharpened in their theology and practice by these contributions. Finally, let us never lose hold of Christ's own claims about Scripture, Scripture's great claims about itself, and Scripture's powerful claims on our lives: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17); "Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, 'That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged' " (Rom. 3:4, quoting Ps. 51:4).

Robert C. (Ric) Cannada Jr., Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary

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January 2012

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Dunahoo, Dr. Michael Rogers, the Rev. John Currie, the Rev. Dustyn Eudaly, the Rev. Mark Johnston, and again Dr. Peter Lillback, each of whom has, in varying ways, put wind in the sails of this work's fresh articulation of the vital truthfulness and reliability of Scripture. Thank you all for your richly redundant reminders of Paul's recalibrating encouragement to Timothy: "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!" (2 Tim. 2:8–9).

David B. Garner
January 2012

Introduction

HISTORY ATTESTS THAT the health of each generation of the church corresponds to its reverence for God's Word. As the view of Scripture goes, so goes the church; as a commitment to God's living Word thrives, God's people thrive. An unswerving reliance upon Scripture produces an active, faithful, vital, and expanding church. When the functional authority of Scripture becomes irrelevant to God's people, the church inescapably abandons its vital mission and becomes an extraneous, spiritually anemic force. The trail to such scriptural neglect exposes various pitfalls into spiritual lethargy.

Passivity, undergirded by an overly optimistic sense of theological stability, has always been among the greatest dangers to the church. Someone once noted, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."[1] As cursorily compelling as is this sentiment, upholding theological orthodoxy is usually not quite as simple as the courageous actions of "good men" combating conspicuous monstrosities. The triumph of evil more often emerges not because overtly evil men with explicitly evil motives seek subversively evil ends, but because decent men with professedly constructive motives and commendable ends do not perceive the dangers of their views.

1. This quote or some version of it is often attributed to historian Edmund Burke, but it most likely did not come from him. Though the source of the quote is uncertain, its meaning represents a commonly held assumption.

Complicating matters, the contemporary scholar who presents an alternative position often perceives the defense of historic orthodoxy as blindness, stubbornness, ineptitude, naïveté, or even intellectual dishonesty. In fact, many scholars are well convinced that their own views represent theological and orthodox advance, and that their resistant brethren are steeped in an unthinking traditionalism, fearfully ignoring fresh discoveries about Scripture out of complacency or for the sake of blind loyalty to a creed.

In certain cases, they have been right. Traditionalism has hamstrung biblical truth more than once in history. The Reformation rediscovery of the pure gospel of grace and its wise mantra of *semper reformanda* underscore the need for discerning openness. Thus new approaches must neither be welcomed nor rejected in the church simply because they appear new. Fresh ideas, however, must come under the scope of the driving hermeneutical principle well expressed in WCF 1.9, which properly places Scripture itself as the final arbiter and interpreter of truth. Applying this authoritative voice of Scripture remains both vital and vexing.

As centuries of church history bear out, the theological orthodoxy assumed by one generation is the orthodoxy eclipsed by the next. Undiscerning charity fertilizes the seeds of heresy, and the tyranny of all-consuming unbelief is never more than one generation away. Perhaps the greatest threat to theological orthodoxy comes not from those who actively purvey error, but those who seek—for the sake of peace and commendable pastoral graces—a middle road. Puritan Robert Traill brilliantly puts his finger on the psychology of those who seek a compromising synthesis: "such men as are for 'middle ways' in point of doctrine, have usually a greater kindness for that extreme they go half-way *to*, than for that which they go half-way *from*."[2]

Today, so-called evangelical theology seems resolute in showing kindness for what once was called liberalism. To put it frankly, there

2. Recorded in James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of Its History in the Church and Its Exposition from Scripture* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), 173.

is an unnerving sympathy within evangelical scholarship for seeking light in darkness, for synthesizing antithesis, and even for wedding belief and unbelief. It has become all too acceptable to appropriate the methods of unbelieving scholarship, to assert common ground with its unbelieving assumptions, and to give such syncretism some credible-sounding, winsome label like "believing criticism."[3] Yet an epistemological, theological, interpretive, or methodological yoke to unbelieving scholarly commitment finds no home in Scripture. "For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?" (2 Cor. 6:14b–16a).

To be sure, preserving theological orthodoxy requires gospel discernment, gospel courage, and gospel grace. It can also be quite lonely. Christian leaders who assess certain controversial formulations as unfortunate and even counterproductive, and even moderates who, in longing for peace, do not usually concern themselves with dividing nuances that seem galactically distant from their practical ministries, may earnestly yearn to believe that their brethren who espouse those controversial formulations would not abandon their theological moorings. Yet the purveyors of new theological perspectives often argue their cases winsomely and can be very persuasive in presenting their resistant rivals as uncharitable. This is nothing new; just remember the case of Athanasius *contra mundum*. Just as she has always done, the church surely must speak to spiritual error courageously and clearly. Yet even the serious stakes do not justify theological rancor; malice and nastiness never represent Christ faithfully. But neither do these stakes warrant a "theology of nice" in the way that political correctness would demand. Our age erroneously caricatures the exposure of errant theology as intrinsically unkind and even un-Christian. The act of simply calling to task gospel error leaves the critic exposed to accusations by many who, while claiming a love for the gospel, betray genuine sympathy only for

3. Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

"generous orthodoxy"[4] or some other strained concatenation of biblical terminology and epistemic relativism. To the theological latitudinarians, the only reprehensible position is that of those who call to task their "bad latitude." Despite the protests, overlooking theological error for the sake of superficial peace is both myopic and disobedient. For that matter, neglect of theological error is hardly charitable.

Thus, rigorous and relentless action combined with astutely applied pastoral wisdom is required for every generation of the church. Error arrives surreptitiously and its embryonic forms appear evocatively progressive to some and harmless to most. And by the time theological moderates and peace seekers discern the seriousness of a particular theological error, the battle has usually already been lost. Mainline denominations in the United States of America give ready examples; such history warns us with symphonic eloquence to address with tireless meticulousness even ostensibly minor theological compromises. Passivity ignites error into blazing evil; rest reaps rot, and the consequences of turning our heads in disregard are disastrous.

But reaction *alone* is neither sufficient nor useful. Upholding the truth of the gospel always involves polemics, but never rightly wages war with unbelief without positively proclaiming the glorious and true hope of the gospel. Blazing the pathway for his disciples, Jesus Christ defied the gates of hell to resist his church (Matt. 16:18–20). He made clear that the *way forward* in seasons of theological compromise or spiritual blindness is the *forward way*. That is, while the temptation surges to draw lines in the sand and only to play theological defense, preoccupation with protection alone fosters spiritual atrophy, and all the while fortifies the frequently accurate though painful stereotypes of stodginess and irrelevance, infighting and naval gazing. Defense alone never builds Christ's church. We do the church no service by only fencing ourselves in with theological barricades, acting as sentries at dogmatic gatehouses.

4. See Brian D. McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2004).

Each generation, building on its forefathers, must seek to restate the truth of Scripture constructively, usefully, and persuasively. We need to rearticulate and celebrate constructive reflections on Scripture. We must preserve and we must promote; we must expose unbelief, and we must express belief. At times rearticulation of theology takes on a polemical face; at other times it takes on a constructive face. But at all times it ought to turn its readers to the face of God in Christ. At all times, the advance of theological truth must undertake just that: gospel advance.

In view of this Christ-centered advancing goal, it might seem odd to title a book on Scripture with words from the archenemy of God himself, the very one who distorts and corrupts God's Word, authors confusion, and leads the masses into damnable darkness. Yet doing so acknowledges the fact that today's *misuse* of God's Word as a method of *undermining* God's Word is neither new nor merely a human endeavor. Though the postmodern age dresses the threats to Scripture somewhat differently, its garments adorn the age-old ploys of the spiritual forces of darkness, whereby the evil one valiantly attempts to lead astray even the elect (Mark 13:22).

When the serpent asks, "Did God actually say?" (Gen. 3:1b), the manner in which he tempts our first parents exposes his consistent *modus operandi*. God's *Word* serves as Satan's point of attack, and twisting and distorting that Word in a way that makes it both familiar and false, he succeeds in deceiving Adam and Eve and their progeny. It is with the Son of God alone that we witness Satan's decisive failure to distort God's Word persuasively, and it is this Son of God who combats the enemy effectively *with the Word of God* (see, e.g., Luke 4:1–11). God's Word purely entreated and directly employed frustrated, disarmed, and ultimately destroyed the tempter.

As Christ relied upon the sufficient, clear, and powerful Word of God, so too must his church, and only in such dependence upon his mighty Word will the church effectively combat the wiles of the enemy. With the force of scriptural authority itself, we turn the question, *Did God Really Say*?, right back on those who continue to

misrepresent the gospel with their serpentine-compatible methods. Skepticism about what God really said must be met with fresh enunciation of what *God did really say*.

Committed to Scripture's inherent authority, the authors of this volume have sought to be faithful to the Word of God and thereby faithful to the God of the Word. At places polemical and at places constructive, for the building up of Christ's church, the essays in this volume seek to uphold Scripture faithfully by advancing its authoritative truth.

- In chapter 1, Scott Oliphint addresses our confessional heritage, and builds a strong case for the relevance of the opening chapter of the WCF. Carefully examining the theology of the historic statement itself, Oliphint exposes the two interwoven foundational principles of the Christian faith—the doctrine of God and the doctrine of Scripture, and demonstrates that we must trust Scripture because God is truth itself and Scripture is *his* Word.
- In chapter 2, Michael Williams returns us to a central figure in the development of inerrancy as a doctrine, B. B. Warfield. Soundly rejecting the false caricatures of Warfield and inerrancy, Williams exposes the covenantal contours of biblical inerrancy, noting not only the objective truthfulness of the Word, but also its necessary concomitant, the living faith of God's people.
- In chapter 3, Michael Kruger addresses the popular critiques about the canon of the New Testament, and provides an insightful, accessible, and constructive response to five points of criticism frequently raised. Exposing the assumptions and methods of those critiquing the New Testament canon, he delivers a compelling case for the propriety of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.
- In chapter 4, Robert Yarbrough puts the language of the 1978 Chicago Statement of Inerrancy into its proper historical and theological framework. He then moves us toward continued positive presentation of the doctrine of Scripture

in this age of unprecedented growth and persecution in the church worldwide, and shows how a proper commitment to a high view of Scripture both characterizes and facilitates the advance of the gospel.

- In chapter 5, Vern Poythress addresses various skeptical theories of language and delivers a strong apologetic for the divine gift of language and the clear voice of God in Scripture. Not only does language have its roots in the Trinity, but God also created this world by speaking. With appreciation for the biblically informed depth of language, Poythress provides responses to current suspicions about metaphor, historical description, stability of meaning, and the philosophical problem of the one and the many.
- In chapter 6, John Frame discusses the contours of N. T. Wright's view of Scripture, highlights points of identification, and underscores some of its doctrinal, epistemological, and functional weaknesses. In the end, Frame calls us to trust in Scripture as the final criterion of truth.
- In chapter 7, I introduce the scope and influence of some contemporary methods of interpretation, and note that, contrary to common contention, biblical clarity is not a product of interpretation but the basis for it. Making a fresh case for an historic doctrine of biblical perspicuity grounded in God's intention to speak to his people, I consider the nature of biblical clarity in view of the unfolding of biblical revelation and how the Holy Spirit's work of illumination coordinates with the clear words of Scripture.

With gratefulness to each contributor, I believe these chapters will draw you to a fresh, informed, and doxological delight in what *God really has said*.

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Abbreviations

BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
I&A	B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948)
Inspiration	Archibald Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007)
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBMW	*Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LW	N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 2005)
PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
PRRD	Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1987, 2003)
RB	*Revue Biblique*

SC	N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)
SE	*Studia Evangelica*
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SSW	Benjamin B. Warfield, *Benjamin B. Warfield: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter, 4th ed., 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001)
StP	*Studia Patristica*
VC	*Vigiliae Christianae*
VE	*Vox Evangelica*
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*

I

Because It Is the Word of God

K. Scott Oliphint

MY TASK HERE is to attempt to offer some helpful points with respect to the relationship between our doctrine of Scripture and the first chapter of the WCF. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of that first chapter. A quick survey of history would show that the church errs and leaves its central task of proclaiming the gospel at precisely the point where it begins to lose its grip on the position articulated in WCF chapter 1, that is, on a *biblical* doctrine of Scripture.

Before looking more specifically at chapter 1, it seems important for the matter at hand to first make clear the *theological* rationale behind the chapter. The question has been asked as to why the confession did not begin with justification, given the central significance of this doctrine during the time of the Reformation, or why it did not begin with Christ, given the centrality of Christology for the Christian faith. We should note here that there was a definite and resolute rationale for beginning this confession with a biblical

doctrine of Scripture. In order to understand that rationale, it will help us to remember the deep-seated roots of the theological (and philosophical) notion of *principia*.[1]

The Principles (*Principia*) of Theology

The term *principia* has its roots in the Greek word *archē* / ἀρχῆ, which means a beginning point, a source, or a first principle. Its theoretical roots go back at least as far as Aristotle. Aristotle argued that *archai* / ἀρχαι—or first principles, or beginning points—are the "first point from which a thing either is or comes to be or is known."[2] In other words, *archai* / ἀρχαι, according to Aristotle, provide the bedrock foundation for everything that is or is known. This concept of a beginning point, what some have called an Archimedean point, is a necessary and crucial aspect of *all* thinking and being. Aristotle understood this, philosophy has continued to articulate this idea, and Christian theology has seen it as basic to its own discipline.

To use just one example in theology, the Dutch Reformed theologian Sibrandus Lubbertus argued in the late sixteenth century that all disciplines, and especially theology, require *principia*, and that such *principia* partake of at least the following properties: (1) they are necessarily and immutably true, and (2) they must be known *per se*, that is, in themselves, as both immediate and indemonstrable.[3] By "immediate" here is meant that the status of a *principium* is not taken from something external to it, but is inherent in the thing itself. It does not mean, strictly speaking, that nothing *mediated* the truth therein, but rather that nothing *external* mediated that truth. By "indemonstrable" here is meant that the *fact* of a *principium*

1. Here I will depend heavily on the historical spade-work of Richard Muller, but see also Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992–2008), 1:205ff.

2. Quoted in Richard A. Muller, *Prolegomena to Theology*, vol. 1 of *PRRD*, 431.

3. Muller, *PRRD*, 1:431.

is not proved by way of syllogism or by external means, but is such that it provides the ground upon which any other fact or demonstration depends. It is, in that sense, as we will see in a minute, a transcendental notion.

For example, speaking of the discipline of theology, Philippe du Plessis-Mornay, the so-called "Huguenot Pope," states:

> For if every science has its *principles*, which it is not lawful to remove, be it ever so little: much more reason is it that it should be so with that thing which hath the ground of all *principles* as its *principle*.[4]

What Mornay says here is not unique among the orthodox Reformed. He is saying much more than that theology has its own *principia*; he was also affirming that, whereas all sciences have their own *principia*, theology's *principia* undergird and underlie any and every other *principia*. The *principia* of other sciences are relative to those sciences; the *principia* of theology are prior to any other *principia* of any and all other disciplines.[5]

For the Reformed, *principia* could never be located, even if tangentially, in the human self. To do so would lead to the kind of skepticism that followed in the wake of Cartesian philosophy. Instead, as Richard Muller notes,

4. Philippe du Plessis-Mornay, *A Worke Concerning the Trunesse of Christian Religion, Written in French: Against Atheists, Epicures, Paynims, Iewes, Mahumetists, and Other Infidels. By Philip of Mornay Lord of Plessie Marlie. Begunne to Be Translated into English by That Honourable and Worthy Gentleman, Syr Philip Sidney Knight, and at His Request Finished by Arthur Golding. Since Which Time, It Hath Bene Reviewed, and Is Now the Third Time Published, and Purged from Sundrie Faultes Escaped Heretofore, Thorow Ignorance, Carelesnes, or Other Corruption*, trans. Sir Philip Sidney Knight and Arthur Golding (London: George Eld, 1604), 2, electronic edition accessed through Early English Books Online, http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home.

5. According to Muller, "Divinity alone begins with the absolute first principles of things which depend on no other matters; whereas the basic principles of the other sciences are only first relative to the science for which they provide the foundation, the basic principles of theology are prior to any other 'principle of Being' or 'principle of knowing,'" Muller, *PRRD*, 1:436.

> The classical philosophical language of *principia* was appropriated by the Reformed orthodox at a time and in a context where . . . [it] served the needs both of the Reformation sense of the priority of Scripture and the Reformation assumptions concerning the ancillary status of philosophy and the weakness of human reason. By defining both Scripture and God as principial in the strictest sense—namely as true, immediate, necessary, and knowable—the early orthodox asserted the priority of Scripture over tradition and reason and gave conceptual status to the notion of its self-authenticating character in response to both Roman polemicists and philosophical skeptics of the era.[6]

We should make clear here that in Reformed thinking there were two *principia*, and this follows again from philosophical discussions dating at least as far back as Aristotle. In *Metaphysics* 4.3, Aristotle notes that first principles, in order to be *first* principles, must themselves be most certain, indemonstrable, immediately evident, and *never* a postulate or hypothesis. According to Aristotle, first principles are that which anyone must have when he comes to study anything at all. First principles, therefore, cannot be something that someone acquires as a result of one's reasoning or argument.

In this sense, as we just mentioned, the *principia* that form the foundation for everything else are themselves transcendental in nature. They provide for the possibility of anything else; if in a particular science, then they provide for the possibility of that science. But if in an ultimate sense, as is the case with theological *principia*, then they provide for the possibility of anything else whatsoever. They provide for the possibility of *being* and for the possibility of *knowing*.

God and His Word

This brings us to a further general point concerning *principia* that relates directly to our confessional study. In the discussions of

6. Ibid., 432.

principia, two categories were central. Again, following on philosophical concerns, *principia* were referenced to two central contexts. There was necessarily a *principium* with respect to Being and, just as necessarily, a *principium* with respect to knowing. *Principia*, therefore, refer primarily to the *principium essendi*, which is the principle, source, or foundation of Being, and the *principium cognoscendi*, which is the principle, source, or foundation of knowing.

Given these two concerns, the two primary doctrines that serve as *principia* for theology are the doctrine of God and the doctrine of Scripture. And while we do not have the space here to work out the relationship between these two *principia*, we should note at least the following.

First, the juxtaposition, so familiar in the Reformed confessions, between the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of God relates specifically to a particular Reformed understanding of who God is and of how he may be known. One of Calvin's brightest students, Franciscus Junius, developed a categorization of the knowledge of God that relates directly to the Reformed scholastic understanding of *principia*.

In attempting to articulate the relationship of God's own knowledge to our knowledge of God, Junius made a distinction between archetypal knowledge and ectypal knowledge. Archetypal knowledge is that knowledge that God alone has. It is knowledge of God that partakes of all the essential divine attributes. Hence, it is knowledge that just *is* God himself, given the simplicity of God.

Ectypal knowledge is true knowledge that has its foundation in archetypal knowledge. Notice that this knowledge is not identical with God's archetypal knowledge. It could not be since archetypal knowledge is infinite, eternal, immutable, etc. But it is nevertheless *true* knowledge, even though finite and limited, because it has its roots in God's own essential knowledge. God himself has ectypal knowledge, based on his archetypal knowledge, and God's ectypal knowledge is given to his creatures by way of revelation; we then also have ectypal knowledge.

This is all just another way of saying that the only way in which we can know God, or anything else, is if God graciously chooses to reveal himself to us. As creatures, therefore—and this is the salient point to make with respect to the Reformed confessions, and the WCF particularly—there is an inextricable *principial* link between God and revelation. From the perspective of the creature, we cannot have one without the other.

It was this concern, the concern for *principia*, as those relate specifically to God and our knowledge of him, that brought about a specifically Reformed doctrine of Scripture. Prior to the Reformation, there is no well-articulated doctrine of Scripture, especially a doctrine of Scripture that fills the place of a *principium cognoscendi*. While Aquinas and Duns Scotus note the necessity of revelation, neither of them develops a doctrine of Scripture as a *principium* of theology.[7]

What we have, therefore, in this most excellent beginning chapter from the WCF is something solidly Reformed, magnificently creative (in the best sense), and theologically (as well as philosophically) charged. What we have is an articulation and a true "confession" of what are for Reformed folk our bedrock foundations, Scripture and God, apart from which we cannot know anything, without which we cannot have any certainty, and behind which we cannot go.

Because It Is the Word of God

I would like now to set out just a highlight or two from chapter 1 of the WCF. We can begin by remembering the historical moment of its composition. According to B. B. Warfield, who quotes noted church historian and WCF scholar Alex F. Mitchell:

> "If any chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith," says Prof. Mitchell, "was framed with more elaborate care than another, it was that which treats 'Of the Holy Scripture.' It was considered paragraph by paragraph—almost clause by clause—by the House

7. This point is taken from Richard A. Muller, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, vol. 2 of *PRRD*, 152.

> of Commons, as well as by the Assembly of Divines, before it was finally passed."[8]

Warfield goes on to note that, in spite of the care given to this chapter, there was very little debate about its content; the divines were, as he says, "very much at one concerning its propositions." The reason for this is fairly clear. By the time the Assembly met to put together the confession, the nature of Scripture, particularly with respect to a *doctrine* of Scripture, was not a controversial issue among Protestants.

Sadly, such is not the case in our own day. Especially with the rise of new forms of theology set forth today, subtle attacks on the doctrine of Scripture as presented in chapter 1 of the confession are proliferating. In order to understand these attacks, we should be clear about the relationship between Scripture itself and our confession.

Scripture as Norming Norm

One way (maybe not the best way) to think of this relationship is by way of a classical, categorical distinction between the *norma normans* and the *norma normata*. In this distinction, Scripture is the *norma normans*, or the norming norm, whereas the WCF is the *norma normata*, or the normed norm. The confession takes its cue from Scripture; embedded in the confession is the theology of Scripture itself. Since, therefore, Scripture is the original authority and is the Word of God, it alone should be seen to be infallible and inspired. The norm that is normed *by Scripture*, that is, the confession, has its authority derivatively; it is not authoritative because of what it is in itself, as is Scripture, but because of its origin. That is, its authority obtains only when and where it is in conformity to Scripture. Unlike Scripture, therefore, the confession is a derivative and fallible document.

8. B. B. Warfield, "The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture," in *SSW*, 2:560.

The Short Step

It is a short step, however, from this truth to its perversion. It is a short step, though we must admit a short *distorted* step, from the affirmation of the confession's fallibility to an affirmation of its functional uselessness. One example will have to suffice here, an example that is given on a more "popular" level and therefore has the double implication of being both superficial and, perhaps for that reason, more influential. In one recent criticism of a confessional approach to theology, the author notes the following:

> Such an approach [that is, a traditional confessional approach to theology] is characteristic among those who hold confessional statements in an absolutist fashion and claim such statements teach the "system" of doctrine contained in Scripture. [It should not escape us here that the author, in this statement, has just indicted the entirety of Reformed and Presbyterian churches.] The danger here is that such a procedure can hinder the ability to read the text and to listen to the Spirit in new ways.[9]

This criticism, we should note is couched in terminology that would be appealing to some, especially to some who look askance at Reformed theology. It is couched in terms that require *either* that one is confessional, or that one is spiritual, i.e., "listening to the Spirit in new ways." This "necessarily provisional dimension" of theology accrues, we are told, to any and every doctrine that is gleaned from Scripture.[10]

It should be noted, however, that this way of construing the relationship of doctrine, and particularly of confessional doctrine, to Scripture gets things backwards. In our affirmation of the full, unique, divine authority of Scripture, and of the consequent possible

9. John Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 135.

10. See as well John R. Franke, "Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics," *WTJ* 65, 1 (Spring 2003): 1–26.

fallibility of every human construction of doctrine, we are *not* at the same time affirming that everything to which we confessional folk subscribe is *only* and always provisional; fallibility and provisionality are *not* two sides of the same coin. I am a fallible human being, prone to sin and limited in everything that I think and do. But that fact does not in any way cause me to lack certainty in the fact that I am now typing these words in my study. Neither should it cause you to lack certainty that you are where you are and are reading these very words. Neither does it cause me to lose certainty about that fact that Christ is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, who took on a human nature, or that the triune God exists, or that Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. These are theological construals, but I am nevertheless certain of their truth. I do not hold such truths provisionally. Fallibility does not *entail* provisionality.

By the same token, the relationship of Scripture to the truth set forth in the confession is not such that we affirm that the Holy Spirit has completed his work of illumination in the church (as if nothing new could be gleaned from Holy Scripture). It goes without saying that an affirmation of truth, even of *much* truth, is not, thereby, an affirmation of *all* truth. Thus these kinds of approaches have yet to work through the most basic issues of what it means to be confessional.

Confessing Biblical Truth

What we confess in our Confession is that a particular confession contains nothing less than biblical truth. What we are confessing, in other words (in words taken from chapter 1 of this very confession), is that, in our subscribing to this confession, we are agreeing that what it articulates, is, *by good and necessary consequence*, the very truth of God himself, revealed in Scripture, and systematically articulated in the confession.

A brief word about the phrase *good and necessary consequence*. Suppose I am your pastor, and I say to you that a consequence of

the biblical command to love your neighbor is that you should be involved, at least voluntarily, in some kind of social mission work each week. You ask me why I would assert such a thing and I say that it follows from the command to love your neighbor. Am I right? Does it follow? It certainly does. But just because it follows from that command does not mean that it is entailed by that command. That is, social work is a *good* consequence of the command to love your neighbor, but it is not a necessary one. To make it a necessary consequence would have the effect of adding a specific command to Scripture.

On the other hand, what if you and I are involved in a Bible study together, and we begin our study with the doctrine of God. We look through Scripture and, after much searching and exegetical work, conclude that when Scripture speaks of the Father it is speaking of God, when it speaks of the Son it is speaking of God, and when it speaks of the Holy Spirit it is speaking of God. The Father has distinct properties, so does the Son, so does the Spirit. What, then, is the necessary consequence of such a study? It is that these three distinct individuals are all three God. Does that mean that there are three Gods? That may be a *necessary* consequence of our study, but it cannot be a *good* consequence, because Scripture will not allow such a conclusion. So, though the fact that the three Persons are distinct, with properties unique to each, and are also all three fully and completely God might *entail* the fact that there are three Gods, Scripture will not allow for such a conclusion. It is not a *good* consequence in that it does not conform to what Scripture requires us to affirm. We affirm, therefore, that God is one in essence and three in Persons; he is both One and Three.

But here is the point with regard to confessions. Is it the case that your affirmation of the Trinity, or mine, is simply a fallible, provisional, "restricting-of-the-Spirit" kind of affirmation? This has not been the church's practice with regard to such a confession. You cannot be a member of a Reformed or Presbyterian church (that is, a *biblical* Reformed or Presbyterian church) unless you confess

in some credible way the triune God, and unless that confession carries with it the content and authority of Scripture itself. That is, your confession is a confession of *your faith*, of the faith as it is set down for us in Scripture, which you have embraced. Or, to put it in more practical terms, once you begin to question the doctrine of the Trinity, any church worth its biblical salt will need to address those questions with you, especially in terms of your membership in that church.

To put it in the context of our discussion of *principia*, if current trends that seek to deny confessional commitment are correct, and if everything is necessarily provisional, then there really are no *principia*, no true, certain, immediate, and indemonstrable principles on which we all must stand. But of course, if that is true, then either Scripture is not infallible, or, if infallible, there is no way for us to access it, since we are all confined within our own contextual or linguistic cocoons. But then, if that is true, not only is everything that we say floating in the air, without grounding or foundation, but there simply is no truth to be had at all. No *principia* means no truth, or at least no knowledge of the truth. The only upside to this is that the notion that everything is contextual and provisional is itself floating in the air, and should be taken no more seriously than anything else.

The first chapter of the WCF is designed to negate such approaches, and to provide parameters within which we can operate. WCF chapter 1 lays out for us the reality of our *principium cognoscendi*; it gives us, in a way that is without equal in the history of the church, a robust and lively doctrine of Scripture. It articulates where it is that Christians stand with respect to that which they claim to know and believe.

The Authority of Scripture

With that in mind, we can focus the discussion on the notion of the authority of Scripture as the confession lays it out for us.

First, a minor point or two with respect to the authority of Scripture. While this is a minor *point*, we should not think that what the Westminster divines did here was a minor *matter*.

After laying out the *necessity* of Scripture—a necessity, we should note, that has its foundation in, as the confession says, the good pleasure of God—the divines provide an itemization of the books of Scripture in section 2. That is, after affirming that it pleased the Lord to have written down what he, at other times and places, chose to reveal in various ways, the confession lays out for us the parts of the whole and affirms those parts to be "given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life." Then section 3, in case there be any misunderstanding, goes on to affirm that the apocryphal books, "not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture."

The reason for sections 2 and 3 is important for our discussion of authority. The so-called "formal principle" of debate during the time of the Reformation was the issue of Scripture, more generally the issue of authority itself. So why spell out each and every book of the Bible? One reason would be that the Council of Trent had done just that, with different results. As a matter of fact, according to Richard Muller, "Beginning with the fourth session of the Council of Trent in 1546 . . . *for the first time in the history of the church* . . . the canon of Scripture received not only clear identification and enumeration but also confessional and dogmatic definition."[11]

Because the issue at the time of the Reformation, including the issue debated during the Counter-Reformation, was the issue of authority, the Council of Trent thought it necessary to enumerate both the books of Scripture and the "official" version of Scripture in the Latin Vulgate. But the books enumerated by Trent are different from the ones enumerated in the WCF.

What should be underscored here is that it is not the case simply that Protestants have a different canon of Scripture than Romanists. That is true enough. But what should be seen, and what is

11. Muller, *PRRD*, 2:372 (emphasis added).

more fundamental, is that the Council of Trent determined not that the books of Scripture would be different *simpliciter* (simply), but that the Roman church would itself *be canon*, the normative rule of faith and practice, for the Roman church. So the issue is not simply which books are included; the issue is *why* the books that are included are included. For the Romanists, the books included are included because the church says so.[12]

It is not the case, therefore, that Scripture is the *principium* for the Roman church. Rather, with regard to the formal principle of the Reformation, two vastly different notions of *principium cognoscendi* emerged. The Roman view is that holy mother church, and it alone, is the true, immediate, and indemonstrable *principium*. This is why a *fides implicita* (implicit faith) is the proper response of those within that church. For the Reformed, however, because Scripture is inspired, it provides its own criteria for canon, and thus is its own self-referential authority.

And this leads us to the major point articulated in section 4 of the WCF. After establishing the *necessity* of Scripture in section 1, and the content of Scripture in sections 2 and 3, section 4 declares the self-referential authority, what we might call the *principial* authority, of Holy Scripture:

> 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.

One of the first things that must be firmly embedded in our minds in this regard is the absolute self-attesting authority of Scripture. You can, no doubt, understand some of the reasons

12. It is worth noting here that the Romanist notion is circular; it declares itself to be its own final authority. The problem, though, is not circularity *per se*; the problem is which circle is the proper one. Rome thinks its circle is proper, based on itself. Historically, the only options available are either that the church is the final authority (thus, authority depends on man) or that Scripture is.

for that, particularly in the face of opposition from Roman Catholicism.

Notice first of all, that the confession is interested specifically here in *authority*, the authority of Scripture. And the intent of the paragraph is to set out for us the *ground* as to why the Scriptures are *authoritative*, and thus why they ought to be believed and obeyed. The section sets out very clearly that the authority of Scripture in no way rests on the church or its councils, or on any man. Rather, its authority rests on its author, God, and is to be received because it is his Word. This is sometimes called the *autopiston* of Scripture, translated as self-attesting, or self-authenticating. What does that mean?

The Self-Attestation of Scripture

We should be clear that self-attestation *does not* mean self-evident. Self-authentication, or attestation, is an objective attribute, whereas self-evident refers more specifically to the knowing agent. It therefore does *not* mean that revelation as self-authenticated compels agreement. That which is self-authenticating can be denied. What it means is that it *needs* no other authority as confirmation in order to be justified and absolutely authoritative in what it says. This does *not* mean that nothing else attends that authority; there are other evidences, which we will see in a moment. What it *does* mean is that nothing else whatsoever is needed, nor is there anything else that is able to supersede this ground, in order for Scripture to be deemed authoritative. To put the matter philosophically, Scripture's warrant rests solely and completely in itself, *because of what it is*, the very Word of God.

This is why we must understand the nature of a *principium* in order to see what the Westminster divines were doing in this chapter. Again, according to Muller,

> Since . . . it is of the very nature of a first principle that it is most certain, indemonstrable or immediately evident, and never a

> postulate or hypothesis, the Reformed orthodox identification of Scripture as the *principium cognoscendi unicum*[13] of theology involves the assumption that the biblical norm cannot be rationally or empirically verified and, indeed, need not be—and that its authority is known in and through its self-authenticating character.[14]

The confession is quite perspicuous at this point. When the question comes as to the ground or foundation of Scripture's authority, the divines knew that to reference anything other than Scripture would be to deny the Word of God as theological *principium*. They knew this because the only other option available, and the prime example of this—the Roman Catholic church—was right before their eyes. And note the juxtaposition of the two *principia* of theology embedded within this one section. The authority of Scripture depends on God, who is truth itself, and therefore is to be received because it is his Word. Not because we say it is his Word or have shown it to be his Word, but because of what it *is*, the very Word of God. Self-attestation is embedded authority.

We should note here that the point made in section 4 of the confession is not *simply* that Scripture is the Word of God because it says it is. Rather, the point is that Scripture is the Word of God because God, who is truth itself, is its author. This is an important point in the face of other, false, religions that also have books that claim to have come from God or to be his word. Many of those books were around during the writing of this confession; the divines were aware of such things.

The point the confession is making, however, is simply that God has worked in a particular way in history, revealing himself through various means along the way, and that now, since it has pleased him to commit such revelation to writing, he himself has authored Holy Scripture. It is incumbent on those who hear it or read it, therefore, to receive it because it is God himself speaking in and through every word of it.

13. "Only source of knowing."
14. Muller, *PRRD*, 1:436–37.

In his discussion on the authority of Scripture, Calvin says this:

> It is utterly vain then to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church that its certainty depends upon churchly assent. Thus, while the church receives and gives its seal of approval to the Scriptures, it does not thereby render authentic what is otherwise doubtful or controversial. But because the church recognizes Scripture to be the truth of its own God, as a pious duty it unhesitatingly venerates Scripture. As to their question [thinking here of the Roman Catholic doctrines]—How can we be assured that this has sprung from God unless we have recourse to the decree of the church?—it is as if someone asked: Whence will we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.[15]

Calvin later declares that Scripture is self-authenticated. "Hence," says Calvin, "it is not right to subject it to proof or reasoning."[16] This is, by definition, a *principium*. Calvin affirms that there is no higher authority to which one can appeal for proof, no better or more transcendent reasoning, than looking to Scripture itself, since it carries with it its own infallible authority. Any other reasoning, any other proof, will simply be subject to error and confusion. The basic principle of self-attestation is that we understand what Scripture *is* by subjecting it to itself, and to itself alone. It is *its own* witness, by virtue of what it is.

The Author of Scripture

We have one further point to make on this section, a point that could easily be overlooked but that is prescient in its affirmation, given current discussions of Scripture. Note that this section, which

15. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 1.7.2.

16. Ibid., 1.7.5.

is the only section that references the authorship of Scripture, says that Scripture has *one* author, and that its author is God.

For the Reformed, God, and God alone, is *the* author of Scripture. It is surely not the case that the Westminster divines were unaware of the fact that God used men to write his own Word. But they were jealous to maintain that, even though men were used to write God's Word down, those men were not, in the fullest sense of the word, *authors*. Men used to write God's Word were the *ministers*, used by God. Scripture's author is God, who uses "actuaries" or "tabularies" to write his words. If the notion of authorship can be used with respect to these men they were themselves *instrumental* secondary authors.[17] Or, to use the causal language in use during this time, men were *instrumental* causes while God, and God alone, was the *efficient* cause of Scripture, and therefore could be referenced as *the* author of Scripture.

God is the primary author of Scripture, and men are instrumental secondary authors. And, if instruments, then what men write down is as much God's own words as if he had written it down without human mediation. We should not lose sight of the fact that this section notes that Scripture's author is God, not God and man. This notion of divine authorship is in keeping with the Scripture's notion of itself, i.e., that it is *theopneustos* ("God-breathed," 2 Tim. 3:16); it is not *theo-* and *anthropopneustos* ("man-breathed").

In other words, what the confession sets out to affirm here is that Scripture is *foundationally* and *essentially* divine. In this entire chapter on the doctrine of Scripture, there is no mention of the human authors of Scripture. This is no oversight in the confession; it is not that the Reformers and their progeny did not recognize the

17. Muller observes that "the Protestant scholastics looked both to the medieval scholastic tradition and to the works of the Reformers. From the medieval teachers they received the definition of God as the *auctor principalis sive primarius Scripturae* and of human beings, the prophets and apostles, as secondary authors or instruments. From the Reformers they received no new language, but they did find confirmation of the point in the repeated identification of Scripture as God's Word, as given by God." Muller, *PRRD*, 2:226.

human element of Scripture. It is not that they were not privy to extra-biblical sources and other cultural, contextual, and human elements that surround Scripture. Rather, it is in keeping with the testimony of Scripture itself about itself that the WCF affirms that Scripture is foundationally and essentially divine (though contingently, secondarily, and truly human).[18] This means for the WCF (and Reformed theology faithful to it) that the *doctrine* of Scripture is to be formulated and framed *first of all* according to *itself* as God's Word (i.e., its *self*-witness).[19] The confession is setting forth the notion here, radical in its context, that one determines *what* Scripture is not by going somewhere outside of Scripture, but by *Scripture itself*. It carries its authority and its "doctrine" within itself. We come again to the notion of Scripture as the *principium cognoscendi*.

Second, and building on the first point, the divines understood that we cannot allow the so-called "phenomena" of Scripture, as important as those phenomena are, to establish a *doctrine* of Scripture, or to determine just what Scripture *is*. This principle is well articulated by B. B. Warfield. Speaking of the human writers of Holy Scripture, Warfield notes:

> If they are trustworthy teachers of doctrine and if they held and taught this doctrine (i.e., of inspiration), then this doctrine is true, and is to be accepted and acted upon as true by us all. In that case, *any objections brought against the doctrine from other spheres of enquiry are inoperative*; it being a settled logical principle that so long as the proper evidence by which a proposition is established remains unrefuted, all so-called objections [based on the data or "phenomena" of Scripture] brought against it [Scripture's self-

18. "[The] distinction between revelation and inspiration is also demanded by the Reformed assumption that, 'considered essentially,' Scripture proceeds from God, while 'accidentally,' it was written by human beings." Ibid., 242.

19. According to Richard Muller: "The entire discussion [of the causes of Scripture] appears to be an outgrowth of the language of Scripture as the *self-authenticating* and *self-interpreting* ultimate norm for faith and practice—and, therefore, the *sole norm* for the framing of a doctrine of Scripture." Ibid., 230 (emphasis added).

> witness] pass out of *the category of objections* to its truth into *the category of difficulties to be adjusted to it*. . . . The really decisive question among Christian scholars (among whom alone, it would seem, could a question of inspiration be profitably discussed), is thus seen to be, "What does an exact and scientific exegesis determine to be the Biblical doctrine of Inspiration?"[20]

This is how we understand Scripture's authority, its inspiration and its self-witness.

In another place, in speaking of the WCF's doctrine of Scripture, Warfield notes the view of John Lightfoot, one of the divines of Westminster. According to Lightfoot, the phenomena of Scripture, which can cause difficulty of understanding, are there, at least in part, for that reason. Commenting on 2 Peter 3:15, John Lightfoot notes Peter's admission that some things in Paul are hard to understand. This, however, does not mean that Scripture's authority is in question, as if our understanding of it were a condition of that authority. Rather, says Lightfoot, Peter

> acknowledges that in some places [the Scriptures] are hard to be understood, and were misconstrued by some unlearned and unstable ones, to their own ruin; yet neither doth he nor Paul, who was yet alive and well knew of this wresting of his Epistles, clear or amend those difficulties, but let them alone as they were: for the Holy Ghost hath so penned Scripture as to set men to study.[21]

This is what it means for Scripture to be its own witness; this is what it means that Scripture is to be believed and obeyed because it is the Word of God. Any other "because" that would be inserted, if thought to be a final court of appeal, would undermine the

20. B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 174–75 (emphasis added).

21. John Lightfoot, *The Harmony, Chronicle, and Order of the New Testament*, vol. 3 of *The Whole Works of the Reverend and Learned John Lightfoot*, ed. John Rogers Pitman (London: J. F. Dove, 1822), 327, quoted in B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 296.

Reformed principle of *sola Scriptura*. It would undermine Scripture's self-attestation. It would undermine the fact of Scripture's essential divinity. This is the note sounded by the apostle in his assessment of his own preaching, an assessment that is directly applicable to Scripture as a whole, that, ultimately considered, it is to be received "not as the word of man, but as what it really [alēthōs / ἀληθῶς] is, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13).

One final point before we conclude. Nothing we have said thus far means that Scripture does not carry anything else with it to testify of its own character. Self-authentication, self-attestation, does not simply exist in a vacuum.

In line with this, and clearly with this in mind, chapter 1 of the WCF, after affirming Scripture's self-attestation, continues in this way in section 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 does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

The point here, perhaps a minor point, though a major truth, is that the arguments and evidence available to show that Scripture is authored by God, that it attests to its own authority, that it is the *principium cognoscendi*, is found, as we should expect by now, in Scripture itself. Scripture's authority, therefore, is not established by man nor given by man, but is intrinsic to its character because of its source. Scripture is essentially authoritative; that is its nature, and there is abundant evidence for that authority.

Conclusion

We may, no doubt, be frustrated that we have not given such a magnificent and majestic chapter its due. We certainly have not. What we have attempted to do, however, is to argue that the structure of this chapter is such that Reformed Christians who subscribe to this confession are thereby bound to affirm the reality and the necessity of theological *principia*. This affirmation will have at least two positive applications for us.

The first is that we will, of necessity, hold the Word of God high as our sole ground for a redemptive knowledge of God (and of everything else). This has the practical effect of helping us to understand just why it is that those outside of Christ must be, as Paul says, "renewed unto knowledge."

One short example of how this might go wrong will help illustrate the point. In a book designed to help readers rethink their doctrine of Scripture, one author contends that due to the humanness of Scripture, any cohesive or coherent understanding of what the Bible says betrays what it, in fact, *is*. So, to attempt to understand how it can be that God is both eternal and that he, for example, interacts with us in time is to do an injustice to what Scripture *is*, it is to deny its humanness, or so we are told. But in arguing against the coherence of Scripture, the author notes that whether or not prayer has "some effect on God" is "for God to know, not us."[22] In this way of thinking, the very reality of prayer has to be reconstrued as an act of agnosticism, because Scripture is so diverse that we could never conjure up a coherent understanding of an eternal and immutable God who actually hears and responds to our prayers. Is there any question, given this example, of just how inextricably linked the *principium cognoscendi* is to the *principium essendi*? The doctrine of Scripture presented here is no abstract doctrine, but is the only way in which we can begin rightly to see who God is and how we might properly worship him.

22. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 107.

The second application of this confessional understanding of what Scripture is will have the effect of solidifying for us the fact that unless Christianity be true, unless, that is, the Reformed doctrine of God and of Scripture as the two inextricably linked *principia* be affirmed, then nothing can either be or be true. This means that revelation must be the ground for everything else that we know, in theology and in any other sphere of life. That, in itself, is fundamental to a Reformed understanding of theology. Without revelation as our *principium*, we have no foundation or ground for any knowledge, including, but not limited to, our knowledge of God in Christ.

"Did God really say?" is a fundamental theological question. If God has not spoken clearly, truly, trustworthily, and in human words, then anything goes: believe what you will, act as you wish—no one can fault you.

The church's historical belief in the truthfulness and trustworthiness of Scripture as God's written Word is being assaulted from without and from within. In this book, seven scholars from Covenant Theological Seminary, Reformed Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary confront and repel many of these attacks. Reasoning clearly, cogently, and carefully, they show that the historical doctrine of Scripture is what Scripture teaches about itself, and that this teaching can meet and defeat the ungodly intellectual schemes brought against it.

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