

TEACHING THROUGH THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Introduction

LESSON 001

TEACHER NOTES

Scripture Demands we Confess

TEACHING NOTE

The very nature of God's revelation to us demands that we confess it. This is the natural implication of being told about the glories and mercies of God that we would seek to tell others, not through thoughtless repetition, but through hearing, meditating, understanding, and proclaiming. This process internalizes the Word of God even when the words we are using for understanding were written hundreds or even thousands of years ago.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Colossians 3:16

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Learning the Truth: The Word of God stands alone in terms of authority, but it was never meant to stand alone in practice. It is God's Word and as such man can add nothing to it, but God built into His design for the church that the Word should be taught and explained. Think of Ezra giving the sense of the Word to the people and of the interaction between Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip in Acts 8, "So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" The Spirit enlightens our hearts to understand, but Christians are meant to be taught the Word by parents, pastors, and elders in the church. It is only the Spirit who can open the eyes of the believer to know the truths of the scripture, but the Spirit works through ordinary means more often than unusual ones. (Nehemiah 8:8, Acts 8:26-40, Ephesians 4:11-12, 2 Timothy 2:2)

Systematizing the Truth: If your mom tells you to clean your room, you understand that command in context. You know your mom and her authority over you, you know where you live and which room is your responsibility, you know from past experience what cleaning is and what it will look like when it's finished. We do the same thing with the scripture, understanding the verse in light of the paragraph, the paragraph in light of the section, section in light of the book, book in light of the other books of the bible, seeking to read different genres in light of how they were intended. The Westminster Confession speaks of this by saying that everything we need to know is "...either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture..." When we organize and systematize theology we are not adding anything to the scripture, but seeking to faithfully understand it in context. Confessions offer a systematic understanding of the scripture that cannot be achieved without that diligence. (Luke 24:27, Acts 20:27, 2 Timothy 2:15, WCF 1.6)

Owning the Truth: A consistent demand of the scriptures is that we hide it away in our hearts. This does involve memorizing scripture, but it also means understanding the scripture so that we can apply it appropriately in various situations. Tools like confessions and catechisms aid with that, again not by adding anything to the scripture, but by providing helpful summaries of the system of doctrine taught in scripture. For example, if someone asked you about the trinity, you know “There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.” The Trinity is taught from Genesis to Revelation, but there is no one verse that says all of that, so what the catechism provides is a pithy, but biblically faithful answer. (Psalm 119:11, Joshua 1:8, 2 Timothy 1:13, 1 Peter 3:15)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Why is it important to do more than simply read the scriptures?**

God calls us not just to read words, but to understand, meditate on, and internalize His truth. Reading alone can remain surface-level; we need to grasp how the whole counsel of God connects and applies to our lives and then live it out.

- **Scripture holds absolute authority on its own, God designed it to be taught and explained through the church. Why do you think God chose to use ordinary human relationships: parents, pastors, and mentors, rather than leaving us to figure out the Bible entirely on our own?**

God delights to work through ordinary means of grace to remind us of the supernatural reality of our salvation. By receiving the Word from vessels of clay our attention is directed from the messenger to the One who gave the message. God is the Good Shepherd, and so He has given His people under shepherds. Being taught in community protects believers from the grievous errors that come from uncorrected ignorance.

- **We saw the example of how commands only make sense when understood in their wider context. What are some practical dangers that happen when we isolate single verses rather than viewing them in light of the whole Bible?**

Isolating verses leads to proof-texting and inventing doctrines foreign to the text. It obscures the overarching message of Scripture, which points entirely to Christ.

- **We are called to be able to defend our faith, how do confessions and catechisms help with that?**

They summarize doctrines taught across the whole Bible into clear, unified, and memorable statements. They provide precise, historically vetted vocabulary to articulate truth clearly and refute common errors. They anchor our answers in the historic, orthodox consensus of the church rather than novel personal ideas.

- **Colossians 3:16 calls us to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly so that we can teach and encourage one another. How are confessions and catechisms a helpful tool towards accomplishing that goal?**

Their pithy, structured format aids in memorizing and digesting deep biblical truths while also giving us a common vocabulary and understanding with our brothers and sisters in the local congregation. They also guard our daily mutual encouragement against drift into shallow or misleading teaching, by putting the troubles of life in the context of the whole counsel of God.

We Steward the Faith

TEACHING NOTE

Christian faith is not something we invented, nor is it something we are ever free to reinvent. Our duty to God is not only to understand and live out our Faith in submission to the Word, but to be able to articulate that to the world and to the next generation of believers. Confessions and catechisms are incredibly helpful tools for us to understand, apply, and teach the truths of the scripture to the next generation, by keeping us safe from error and by giving us a vocabulary and set of concepts to summarize and explain the Word to any who should ask.

But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. 2 Timothy 1:12–14

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Fidelity over Novelty: We need systematic theological statements not only to understand the scripture for ourselves, but in order to test and try what is being taught. The human inclination is to seek out new and interesting things, but that is death and hell in theology for the simple fact that God and His Word have not changed. Though faithfully applying the truths of scripture in each passing generation may look different, the fundamental truths of the scripture will not ever change. We have been called to receive an inheritance of sound words and to pass it on to the next generation uncorrupted. Think of it like buried treasure, the location of which is passed on from generation to generation. You don't want your grandpa adding his own twist, because that won't change the physical location of the treasure, it is where it is. We do believe that the church makes progress in understanding throughout history: in precision, clarity, and understanding. For example the Westminster Confession speaks more clearly about the Trinity than the Apostles' Creed, but both confess the same thing in terms of fundamental theology. (Acts 17:11, Galatians 1:8-9, 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Jude 1:3)

Passing It On: One of the key reasons we shouldn't innovate in theology is because we have been given the task of passing it on to the next generation. Even if you never have kids, as a member of the church you promise at every infant baptism to "undertake the responsibility of assisting the parents in the Christian nurture of this child." We have a duty to steward our own theology well in order to pass it on faithfully to the next generation. In order to do this task well we must: understand the Word, be able to articulate the truths of the Word, and preserve the doctrines of the Word. There is no safer and better way to do that than studying the confessions and catechisms of your church. (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, Psalm 78:4-7, 2 Timothy 2:2)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Why does human nature naturally crave novel, trendy theological ideas, and why is novelty so hazardous to sound Christian doctrine?**

God designed mankind to fill the earth and subdue it, this naturally requires curiosity, learning, growing, inventing, but the fall corrupted our nature and motivations so that now our hearts are “idol factories” as Calvin put it. So we constantly seek new ways to dethrone God and to increase our own power and glory. So innovations in theology are, by definition, a rejection of God’s authority to tell us what to do and when. Small compromises lead to big heresy down the line.

- **Paul tells Timothy to guard the deposit entrusted to him. What does it look like practically for a modern Christian to “guard” biblical doctrine?**

Answers will vary. It can mean to learn and know the truth in such a way as to be able to discern falsehood when they hear it and avoid the foolish innovations of much of modern Christianity.

- **How do the confessions and catechisms of our church serve as a reliable filter to test what we hear from modern teachers, books, and podcasts against the whole counsel of God?**

It offers a quick guardrail. For instance, if a popular author minimizes the total depravity of man, denies the bodily resurrection, or treats extra-biblical writings as Scripture, our confessions immediately alert us that this contradicts the whole counsel of God.

- **The truths we confess every Sunday have been tested, refined, and upheld through centuries of church history, how should that give you confidence when facing modern skepticism and theological confusion?**

It assures us that our faith is not a fragile, individualistic opinion, but the tested, public consensus of the global church of all ages preserved by the Holy Spirit across trials and controversies.

- **What happens to the spiritual health of a church when one generation neglects the disciplined, doctrinal instruction of the next generation?**

It very rapidly destroys itself. Historically denominations go astray generationally. It is very rare for a generation to abandon the faith in their own lifetimes, usually the way it works is that they fail to explain the faith winsomely and well and so their kids don’t know the important things to hold to.

References — Introduction

– Carl Trueman, *Why Christians Need Confessions*
opc.org/nh.html?article_id=771

– Carl Trueman, *The Credal Imperative*

Glossary — Introduction

Apostles' Creed —An early Christian statement of faith summarizing core biblical doctrine. Though not authored directly by the apostles, it is so named because it faithfully expresses the apostolic doctrine of the New Testament church.

Catechism —Structured summary tools—often using a question-and-answer format—designed for systematic Christian instruction, memorization, and discipleship.

Confession —The public declaration or formal written summary of biblical doctrines and convictions held by believers and the church.

Doctrine —The body of authoritative biblical teachings and foundational principles of the Christian faith.

Elder —A man ordained to the office of spiritual oversight, teaching, and governance of the congregation, divided into two types: teaching elders (ministers) and ruling elders.

Godhead —The divine nature or Deity—the one, undivided, infinite essence that is God. The single Godhead subsists eternally in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who are one in substance, power, and eternity. To speak of the Godhead is to speak of the fullness of what it is to be God.

Good and Necessary Consequence —Not every Christian doctrine appears word-for-word in the Bible. Some truths must be drawn out by carefully reasoning from what Scripture clearly teaches. The Reformed principle of good and necessary consequence holds that a doctrine carries full biblical authority whether it is explicitly stated in the text or logically and necessarily follows from what the text says. The doctrine of the Trinity is the classic example: the word never appears in Scripture, yet the doctrine is clearly taught there.

Good Deposit —The apostolic body of sound doctrine and biblical truth entrusted to the church to guard, practice, and pass down uncorrupted.

Holy Spirit —The third person of the Trinity, eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son, who applies redemption through regeneration, indwells believers, and sanctifies them progressively.

Infant Baptism —The covenant sign and seal applied to the children of believers, marking them as members of the visible church and heirs of God's covenant promises.

Internalizing —The act of taking God's Word deeply into one's heart and mind through meditation, understanding, and personal conviction.

Ordinary Means of Grace —The primary outward instruments ordained by God—principally the Word, sacraments, and prayer—through which the Holy Spirit works salvation and spiritual growth in believers.

Persons —In Trinitarian language, the three distinct subsistences within the one divine essence—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. They are not three gods, nor three parts of God, nor three names for one person, but three who are genuinely distinct yet share fully and equally the one undivided substance. The distinction among the persons lies in their eternal relations, not in any difference of nature or being.

Revelation —God’s direct act of making His character, will, and redemptive purpose known to mankind, culminated in the written Scriptures. See also Natural Revelation and Special Revelation.

Spirit —A being without body or material parts, immaterial and invisible. To confess God as “a most pure spirit” affirms that He has no physical form and is not composed of parts, but is simple, whole, and undivided in His being. As spirit, He is present everywhere and is perceived not by the senses but known through His revelation.

Substance —The essential divine nature shared identically, fully, and indivisibly by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Systematic Theology —The orderly arrangement of all biblical doctrine by topic, demonstrating the harmony and consistency of God’s revelation across Scripture.

The Father —The first person of the Trinity, unbegotten, who planned redemption from eternity, sent the Son, and adopts believers as His children.

The Son —The second person of the Trinity, eternally begotten of the Father, who became incarnate as Jesus Christ to accomplish redemption and now reigns at the Father’s right hand.

Theology —In its narrow sense, the study of God Himself; in its broad sense, the systematic study of everything God has revealed in Scripture.

Trinity —The biblical truth that the one true God eternally exists as three distinct, co-equal persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Westminster Confession of Faith —The 1647 Reformed doctrinal standard and subordinate summary of faith produced for Presbyterian churches.



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MONERGISM STUDY GUIDE