

TEACHING THROUGH THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Chapter 1: Of the Holy Scripture

LESSON 002

TEACHER NOTES

REVIEW FROM PREVIOUS LESSON

Last week we considered how Scripture demands that we confess it. God's Word is our authority, yet He designed it to be taught and explained through the church: by parents, elders, and those who are ahead of us in the faith. Confessions and catechisms serve that purpose, not by adding to Scripture, but by summarizing what the whole Bible teaches in a clear and memorable way. We've received a good inheritance, and our duty is to guard it and pass it on faithfully to the next generation.

The Necessity of the Bible

TEACHING NOTE

The Westminster Confession starts with the Word because *Sola Scriptura*, the necessity and supremacy of the Word, is a central pillar of the Christian faith that was known for centuries and re-discovered during the Reformation. Our entire faith rests upon the Word. What we see here is the utter necessity of God's divine revelation of Himself if we would have any hope of salvation.

"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." Romans 1:19–20

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 1.1

1. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

TEACHING CONTENT

Natural Revelation: Creation testifies clearly that there is a God and that He is skillful, wise, and good, this is enough to condemn us for falling short of His law but not to know God savingly. We can know of Him as creator and Judge from nature but we cannot know Him as savior without more. We can know of Him, but we cannot know him savingly from creation alone. (Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:19-20, 1 Corinthians 1:21)

Special Revelation: To truly know God He must condescend to us and reveal Himself to us. This came to His church in various means across history: prophets, dreams, visions, but has now been written down for us in the Scriptures. He has told us who He is and what He has done for us in Christ. Special revelation allows us sufficient knowledge of God to be saved through faith in Christ by showing us His character, His covenant, and His promise of redemption. (Hebrews 1:1-2, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:20-21)

The Written Word: To ensure that this revelation would not be lost and that His people would know and hear the gospel, He had it committed to writing. This is because of the corruption of the flesh, the malice of Satan and of the world, which all work together to conspire to hide and distort the truths of God. Having the objective Scriptures gives the church an unchanging anchor to preach, teach, read, and appeal to in every generation. (Isaiah 30:8, Luke 1:3-4, Romans 15:4, 2 Peter 1:19-21)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **If creation clearly reveals God's existence and power, why isn't that enough for salvation? What is missing from what nature can tell us?**

General revelation reveals God's power, justice, and divinity, which leaves all men without excuse, but it reveals nothing of the gospel. Nature shows us our guilt before a holy Creator, but it cannot reveal Christ, the covenant of grace, or the way of redemption through faith.

- **God revealed himself through prophets, dreams, and visions for centuries. Why is having it written down actually better for the church than continuing revelation would be?**

A written text preserves God's truth intact across generations, guarding it against human forgetfulness, oral distortion, and Satan's lies. It gives the church an objective, public standard so all believers can test every teacher, doctrine, and practice against the same unchanging benchmark.

- **Our own sinful tendencies, the culture around us, and spiritual opposition all work together to distort God's truth. Where have you seen this happen in history or in your own life?**

In church history, elevating human tradition and unwritten teachings alongside Scripture led to medieval errors like indulgences, clerical celibacy, and papal supremacy. In modern culture, the church has been tempted to abandon teaching about creation, gender roles, gender itself, the reality of hell, and any number of other clear biblical truths.

- **When your personal feelings fluctuate or difficult circumstances arise, how does resting on an objective, unchanging written promise provide a stability?**

It gives us an immovable foundation of truth when our circumstances, trials, or feelings scream the opposite. It is based on God's unchanging character and made clear in His unchanging Word.

- **If the Bible is truly our only sufficient and necessary guide for knowing God and His will, how should that conviction practically reshape the way you seek guidance, make decisions, and evaluate the advice of the world?**

We should submit all worldly counsel, cultural trends, and personal impulses to the Word. We will stop chasing mystical signs or inner impressions for daily decisions, resting instead in the ordinary means of grace, prayer, and sanctified biblical wisdom from our Elders. We will make immersion in the Word our primary discipline for discerning God's will and shaping our conscience.

The Content of the Bible (WCF 1.2-3)

TEACHING NOTE

By specifically listing the sixty-six canonical books and rejecting the Apocrypha, the Confession forces us to recognize that we cannot safely rely on God's Word for salvation if we don't know exactly what is His Word and what isn't. This is a specific area of disagreement with the Roman Catholic Church, but they only decided to formally accept the apocrypha as scripture at the Council of Trent in 1546.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16–17

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 1.2-3

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

Of the New Testament: The Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; The Acts of the Apostles; Paul's Epistles to the Romans, Corinthians I, Corinthians II, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians I, Thessalonians II, to Timothy I, to Timothy II, to Titus, to Philemon; The Epistle to the Hebrews; The Epistle of James; The first and second Epistles of Peter; The first, second, and third Epistles of John; The Epistle of Jude; The Revelation of John.

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.

TEACHING CONTENT

No Continuing Revelation: Christ is the center of history, all of the Old Testament points forward to the coming Messiah and the New Testament speaks of Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension, and His creation of His church. As such God has ordained that everything necessary concerning Christ should be written down. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." (Hebrews 1:1–2). As such, we have all that we need in it for faith and godliness and we will get no more special revelation until Christ comes again. (Jude 1:3, Revelation 22:18-19, Ephesians 2:20)

Authority of Scripture: If the scripture is the only rule of faith and practice, then we have to know which books are scripture and which aren't. There are many books written by the church that are helpful and good, including some of the Apocrypha, but if they are not the Word then they have no authority to regulate the Christian life or bind the conscience. (2 Timothy 3:16-17, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Matthew 15:6-9, Deuteronomy 12:32)

Canon of Scripture: The history of the church shows that there are 66 books of the Bible. 39 books in the Old Testament, as has always been affirmed by the Jews in the Old Covenant, and 27 books in the New Testament as was recognized by the church very early on. To be clear, at no point did the church choose which books were scripture and which weren't, they only recognized and formalized what God had made clear to His people. (Galatians 1:8-9, 2 Peter 1:20-21, 2 Peter 3:15-16)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Some Christians today claim to receive new revelation from God. What is the theological problem with claiming continuing revelation?**

It undermines the sufficiency and finality of Scripture as a direct attack on Sola Scriptura. Because God spoke definitively through His Son and laid the foundation of the church through the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20) claiming new revelation implies that the Word is incomplete.

- **Why does it matter which books are in the Bible?**

The Word is the standard of what we believe and how we live. Only the Word can bind men's consciences to do or not do anything. Adding to it or subtracting from it could only serve to damage or even destroy our faith as we do and believe wrong things or incomplete things.

- **The church recognized the canon rather than choosing it. What is the difference, and why does that distinction matter?**

The church did not choose which books belong in the bible, they recognized corporately which books God had inspired and intended for inclusion in the bible. The authority of scripture is based upon God's authorship and is self-authenticating. The Church is built on the Word, not the Word on the foundation of the Church.

- **Why do you think God chose to have his revelation written down rather than simply passed on through trusted teachers and oral tradition?**

Written text provides an objective, unchanging anchor for the faith throughout all generations. By definition an oral tradition cannot be double checked and a teacher is the final say on what it says. With the written word we can check teachers, confirm truths, study ourselves.

The Authority of the Bible (WCF 1.4-5)

TEACHING NOTE

The Scriptures have authority over the church because they are the Word of God. He has spoken and we, as His people, must listen. It is the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit that confirms and seals the truth of everything contained within it. So even though the church plays an incredibly important role in the life of the believer, ultimately the officers of the church are only stewards of what God has revealed with no power to impose their own will upon believers.

“And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” 2 Peter 1:19–21

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 1.4-5

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.

TEACHING CONTENT

The Work of the Spirit: The scriptures make it clear that they are the Word of God by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts pointing us to the truth of the Word. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me,” (John 10:27). When the believer reads the Word the Holy Spirit opens their hearts and minds not just to understand what is written, but to believe that it is the Word of God. This is not a subjective standard based on personal feeling, but an objective standard based on the work and character of God. (1 Corinthians 2:12–14, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 1 Corinthians 12:3)

Other Evidences for the Scripture: It is only the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit that we know for certain the scriptures are the Word of God and yet God has given many other evidences to strengthen and build up our faith. The internal content of the Word is clearly divine having more glory, consistency, grace, and beauty than is possible for any merely human work. Furthermore the church of all ages has testified to the scriptures as the Word of God, recognizing and affirming its authority. (Psalm 19:7–10, Hebrews 4:12, Proverbs 30:5)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **How do we know that the Bible is the Word of God?**

The Scriptures show that they were written by God through their heavenly wisdom, unity of message over many centuries, and power to change hearts and minds. But our full certainty that the Bible is the infallible Word of God comes only through the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness in our hearts.

- **What does it mean for us that the Bible is the Word of God?**

It means Scripture is the only rule of faith and practice, binding on every believer's conscience and that we are obligated to receive, believe, and obey it as God's will for us. It means that we have an objective, unchanging anchor that remains the same despite the changing circumstances of this world and the corruption of men.

- **What about the Bible strikes you as clearly more than a human book?**

It is all about Christ from thousands of years before Christ was born through to the closing of the canon, every prophecy was fulfilled, every type and shadow revealed in Christ. It also has demonstrable power to convict, convert, and sanctify.

- **Why is it important that our ultimate assurance of Scripture's authority comes from the Holy Spirit rather than from arguments or evidence?**

Arguments and evidences can be debated, disputed, or overwhelmed by counter-arguments. They can be helpful but they will never give you certainty. Only the Holy Spirit will give you that certainty. This also protects Sola Scriptura, because the Word's authority rests on God's testimony not man's arguments and therefore it cannot be overthrown by man's arguments.

- **What would it mean practically for a church if its officers believed they had authority over Scripture rather than under it?**

They would add to or subtract from God's Word, neglecting or contradicting the parts they don't like and binding consciences with commands God never gave. The corruption of man means that the church would be full of abuses. The medieval church shows the reality of this through papal supremacy, clerical celibacy, indulgences, simony, and many more traditions that overruled the Word.

- **If someone says "the Holy Spirit told me something that contradicts the Bible," how would you respond using what the Confession teaches here?**

The Holy Spirit never contradicts His own Word. Any private impression that contradicts the written Word is not from the Spirit but from the person's own desires or spiritual deception. Any claim of revelation, insight or wisdom must be judged against the standard of the Word.

References — Chapter 1

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Glossary — Chapter 1

Apocrypha —A collection of ancient Jewish books written during the 400 years of prophetic silence following Malachi and before John the Baptist. They were not divinely inspired and were never rightly received as Scripture, though Rome's Council of Trent erroneously elevated them to canonical status in 1546 in direct contradiction of the historic position of the church. They are to be used no differently than any other helpful human writings.

Authority of Scripture —The Bible, as the Word of God, has the complete right to demand our belief and command our obedience. This authority does not come from the church, from scholars, or from any human endorsement, but from God alone. It carries full authority simply because God Himself is its author, and God cannot lie or be mistaken.

Canon of Scripture —The fixed, authoritative rule of faith and life consisting exclusively of the sixty-six inspired books of the Old and New Testaments. The true church does not create, choose, or give authority to the canon; rather, it simply recognizes and formalizes the specific books that God has uniquely given by divine inspiration.

Catholic (Roman Catholic) —The Roman Catholic Church under the authority of the Pope, distinct from the Protestant churches, and claiming exclusive continuity with the historic church.

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

Covenant —A formal, binding agreement between parties; in theology, the sovereign relationship God establishes with humanity through promises and obligations.

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

Grace —God’s unmerited favor toward sinners; His free gift of salvation and divine enablement that cannot be earned or deserved.

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.

Infallible —Where inerrancy speaks to the factual accuracy of the original manuscripts, infallibility speaks to the Bible’s complete trustworthiness as our guide for faith and life. Because God cannot deceive, His Word will never mislead us, though we may certainly mislead ourselves through careless or faithless reading of it.

Inspiration —Inspiration refers to the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit breathing out God’s Word through chosen human authors. The biblical writers were not robots or passive dictation machines. God worked through their genuine personalities, languages, and experiences so that every word they wrote was truly theirs, and yet every word was also truly God’s. The result is a Bible that is fully human in its expression and fully divine in its authority.

Natural Revelation —God has revealed Himself to every human being through the created world and the works of His providence. This revelation is real and true: it communicates genuine knowledge of God’s existence, power, goodness, and wisdom. However, it is not saving knowledge. Natural revelation leaves every person without excuse before God on the day of judgment, but it cannot tell us who Christ is, how sinners are forgiven, or what we must do to be saved. It is enough to condemn, but not to save.

Providence —God’s continuous upholding, directing, and governing of all creation, creatures, and events according to His eternal decree and holy wisdom.

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.

Rule of Faith —Because God is the single author of Scripture, the Bible never contradicts itself. This means the Bible is its own best interpreter. When a passage is difficult or obscure, the answer is not to look to church tradition or human reason as the final word, but to compare that passage with other parts of Scripture that speak more clearly on the same subject. Difficult texts are always interpreted in light of clearer ones, never the other way around.

Sola Scriptura —Scripture alone is the final and supreme authority over the faith and life of the church. We can value tradition, creeds, and confessions as useful and faithful summaries of biblical teaching, they carry no independent authority of their own. No council, no pope, no elder, and no tradition can bind the conscience where Scripture has not spoken.

Special Revelation —God’s voluntary condescension to actively step in and communicate His character, His specific will, and the plan of salvation directly to His chosen people. Historically given ‘at sundry times, and in divers manners’ through methods like dreams, visions, and the prophets, it has now been fully and permanently committed to writing in the Holy Scriptures.

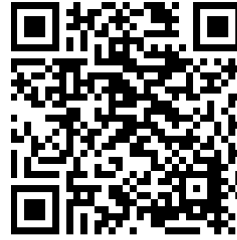
Spirit —A being without body or material parts, immaterial and invisible. To confess God as “a most pure spirit” affirms that He has no physical form and is not composed of parts, but is simple, whole, and undivided in His being. As spirit, He is present everywhere and is perceived not by the senses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

The Light of Nature —See Natural Revelation

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



LESSON CONTENT



MONERGISM STUDY GUIDE