

TEACHING THROUGH THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

Chapter 1: Of the Holy Scripture

LESSON 003

TEACHER NOTES

REVIEW FROM PREVIOUS LESSON

While the created world reveals God's power and goodness, it is necessary for Him to directly reveal Himself in order for us to know Him as savior. In order for us to know Him and to be certain that we know Him rightly, God has committed His revelation to writing in the 66 canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. The authority of these books rest solely upon the fact that God is the ultimate author.

The Sufficiency and Clarity of the Scriptures (WCF 1.6-7)

TEACHING NOTE

The Word of God is the most important thing in the Christian life. It is the means that God uses to reveal Himself and to shepherd His people. The bible doesn't work mechanically or magically. Just having a copy doesn't save you, they are words that must be read, preached, prayed through and understood; but the beauty of the Word is that it CAN be understood. Everything necessary for salvation can be understood through diligent use of ordinary means by reading and hearing the Word read and preached. In doing so, the believer can safely come to conclusions on everything they need to know to repent, believe the gospel, and walk in faith.

"...and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 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 3:15-17

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 1.6-7

6. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. 7. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

TEACHING CONTENT

The Sufficiency of Scripture: The Word of God contains everything that we need for this life and the life to come. Everything that a man or woman must know about God and himself to repent, believe, and walk in Christ is either made explicit in the Word or can be figured out based on the clear things the Word does say. There are no hidden mysteries to be revealed or magic power needed to understand.

Perspicuity of Scripture: The Scriptures are clear and plain. They show who God is, what He has done for us in Christ, the necessity of salvation by grace through faith in Christ, and the manner of life that must result from true faith. Anyone with ears to hear will find these facts laid out plainly and clearly, without secret codes or impossibly complex formula. It is a Word with infinite depth for a lifetime of study and yet the basics can be known by simply reading with faith.

The Work of the Holy Spirit: Without the Work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts we will not only not recognize the scriptures as the Word of God, we also won't be able to understand them. What is plain in scripture will be useless to us, not because it is not plain, but because we see it as foolishness without the work of the Spirit. When God gives you new life, He gives you the eyes of faith to be able to see the Word for what it is, and increasingly to understand and obey it.

Sanctified Wisdom: The Word tells us everything we need to know, but many things in this life have been left to sanctified wisdom. For example we are commanded to worship the Lord on Sunday, but we aren't told what time the service should be. In light of that the elders of the church are called to use their knowledge of the Word, their God given wisdom, and their understanding of their flock to determine things like service times. In doing so they are not able to make authoritative declarations and must give much grace to other sessions who made different decisions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **What does “in a due use of the ordinary means” imply about how we should read the Bible?**

We should come to the scriptures with the expectation that God will reveal Himself to us in a way that teaches us and changes us. We should devote ourselves to the diligent use of the ordinary means so that we are in a position to be blessed by God.

- **If Scripture is clear, why do sincere, Bible-believing Christians disagree over various doctrines and interpretations?**

Human sin and human weakness. Some men distort the clear meaning of scripture for their own gain and teach others to do likewise. While other things are simply more complicated and men without proper teaching can simply get confused. Perspicuity guarantees that everything necessary for salvation is plain to anyone using the ordinary means of grace, not that every complex passage is equally simple to understand.

- **What is the difference between the Holy Spirit illuminating Scripture for a believer and someone claiming the Spirit gave them new revelation?**

Inward illumination points you to the Word. It confirms the truth of the Word and helps you to understand what is written there. A false claim of new revelation, by necessity, distracts from and undermines the Word.

- **If everything necessary for salvation is already in Scripture, why do so many Christians feel they need new revelation or new traditions?**

Life is hard and men have short lives and short memories. It is easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that a book written so many years ago couldn't possibly speak to our complex modern world, but nothing about human nature has changed since Adam's fall. The way of salvation and manner of life required of us is the same as that of the Puritans, the Apostles, and the Patriarchs. There is nothing new under the sun.

Additionally, we want to be god. It is not enough for us to worship God as He has commanded, we want to bring our own strange fire (Lev 10) in order to keep ourselves entertained.

- **The Confession says truth can be deduced from Scripture by “good and necessary consequence.” Can you think of an example of a doctrine that works that way?**

The Trinity is the classic example. There is no single proof text for the Trinity, but we can deduce the fundamental truths of the Godhead from the various passages working together.

The Utility of the Bible (WCF 1.8-10)

TEACHING NOTE

In order for the bible to be profitable, it must be understood. To that end God has both preserved the scriptures in the original Greek and Hebrew while also causing it to be translated into the common languages of His people so that they can rightly understand the Word. Because the Word is the only authoritative rule for faith and practice in the church, it alone is to be our final source of appeal. Though all the world should disagree with the scriptures, we should stand on the Word, come what may. This also means that we are to interpret scripture in the light of scripture, letting its assertions and assumptions rule our thinking and how we understand its meaning.

“Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.”

– 1 Corinthians 14:6-11

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH 1.8-10

8. The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.

9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

TEACHING CONTENT

- **Inerrancy, Preservation and Transmission:** When we say the scriptures are without error, we mean specifically that in the original document in the original language they are without error. So the greek manuscript of Revelation is without error, while the ESV, NIV, NASB translations of Revelation are good, helpful, trustworthy as a human work they cannot be completely without error. So God preserved those original language manuscripts for the church causing each of the 66 books of the Scriptures to be saved, copied, and passed down without error. It was a complicated historical process, where individual manuscripts introduced minor errors and corruption, but for each error introduced in one manuscript it was not in another, allowing the church to have sufficient documentation to know for certain what the scriptures say in the original languages.

- **Translation:** The Lord came to seek and to save the lost. It was never His intention to keep the Word of salvation behind locked doors, accessible only to scholars, but rather to see it in the hands and written on the hearts of young and old, rich and poor from every tongue tribe and nation. As such we can and should translate the scriptures into the languages that people actually know and speak so that they can hear the gospel and follow Christ.
- **Rule of Faith:** The Word of God is a cohesive whole. All parts agree with each other because all come forth from the mouth of God. So if Paul tells us that we are not justified by works of the law but James tells us that faith without works is dead, it is incumbent upon us to seek to understand in the context of both truths. Even if something should remain mysterious to us, that is a weakness in us and not in the truth of the Word.
- **Sola Scriptura:** We have not been left to fend for ourselves with only ourselves and the bible. God has graciously given us the record of church history and continued shepherding under the elders of the church, but all of their actions and decisions are right or wrong only on the basis of the Word of God. It is ultimately the Word that is the authority in the church and it is that authority that we must appeal to in times of controversy and strife.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Why is it wrong to say, “The Bible is clear, so I don’t need teachers, preaching, creeds, or commentaries”?**

We are one in Christ. God has called us to be a body and designed the church to function in our lives as teachers, mentors, and guides. We are not the first generation of believers and it is foolishness and rebellion against God to pretend that we are.

- **Why can we trust our English Bibles while still saying the Hebrew and Greek originals are the final standard?**

Because they are translated from the original languages. It is not a game of telephone where one language is translated to another and then a third and a fourth, with each transmission losing nuance and meaning. Every translation from the King James to the ESV was a work of a group of scholars using original language manuscripts. They represent our best efforts to render that authoritative original into the languages commonly understood by the people of the church.

- **What would happen to the church if Scripture were kept only in languages ordinary people could not understand?**

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ, (Romans 10:17). If we didn’t have access to the scriptures the light of the church would dim and the power of the gospel to transform lives would be lessened. We would go back to the horrible plight of the church in the middle ages when the gospel was locked behind a latin no one understood and so the church lurched headlong into foolish superstitions, heresy, and sin.

- **What should we do when one passage of Scripture seems to conflict with another?**

Interpret the less clear in light of the more clear. Revelation is complicated, Matthew is simple. Additionally we should read with the eyes of faith that say “even if I can’t understand this, that doesn’t mean there is anything wrong in the scriptures.”

- **Why must Scripture interpret Scripture rather than our feelings, traditions, or favorite teachers interpreting Scripture?**

Because only the scriptures have ultimate authority. If we let anything else have authority over the scriptures then we have abandoned the authority of the word and are driving ourselves headlong into destruction.

- **What is the difference between honoring church history and making church history our final authority?**

We are not the first generation of Christians, we should learn from the wisdom and avoid the mistakes of our forefathers in the faith. But we need to approach everything as good Bereans, searching the scriptures to see if it is so. Our forefathers can help us understand the scripture, but they can't by their traditions overrule the scriptures.

References — Chapter 1

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Glossary — Chapter 1

Authentic —The original Old Testament manuscripts were written in Hebrew and the New Testament manuscripts in Greek. Because God directly inspired these documents, they are the definitive and final authority in all matters of faith. While translations are valuable and necessary, the church must ultimately appeal to these original languages when serious controversies arise.

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.

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.

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.

Illumination —The supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in the heart and mind of a believer, overcoming spiritual blindness and enabling a saving understanding and conviction of the truth revealed in the written Scriptures. Illumination does not impart new revelation or extra-biblical truth; rather, it opens the eyes of faith to perceive, embrace, and obey the revelation God has already provided in His Word.

Inerrancy —Because God is the author of Scripture and God cannot lie, the original manuscripts of the Bible were completely true and entirely free from error of any kind. We do not possess these originals today, but God in His providence has preserved the biblical text so faithfully through copying and transmission that we can know with confidence what the originals said and trust our translations as a reliable and trustworthy rendering of His Word.

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.

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.

Perspicuity —The Bible is clear. The core truths necessary for salvation are presented so plainly in Scripture that any person, educated or not, can understand them through ordinary reading and hearing of the Word read and preached. This does not mean every passage is equally easy to interpret or that difficult texts do not exist. It means that no one needs a priest, a pope, or a scholarly elite to unlock the Bible's saving message for them. The gospel is accessible to all.

Preservation —Despite centuries of hand-copying across thousands of manuscripts (transmission), God in His providence has kept His Word pure and intact. Minor variations exist between manuscripts, but none affect any doctrine of the faith. The church today possesses an abundance of manuscript evidence, far more than any other ancient document, giving us every confidence that we know what the original texts said. God did not inspire His Word only to lose it. He who gave us Scripture has faithfully kept it.

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.

Sanctified Wisdom —Scripture does not answer every practical question the church will face. For matters the Bible leaves open, church officers are called to apply their knowledge of the Word, their God-given wisdom, and their care for their congregation to make faithful decisions. These decisions are not binding declarations and must always remain subject to Scripture.

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.

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.

Sufficiency of Scripture —The Bible contains everything necessary for salvation and godly living. God has given us in Scripture the complete counsel of His will for His glory, our salvation, and our daily lives. Because Scripture is fully sufficient, nothing may be added to it. We do not need new revelation. We need faithful obedience to the revelation we already have.

Supreme Judge —When religious controversies arise, something must serve as the final word. For the Reformed church that final word is not a pope, a council, or a private spiritual experience. It is the Holy Spirit speaking through the written Scripture. This means that every theological debate, every church ruling, and every theological claim must ultimately be brought to the bar of Scripture and settled there.

The Light of Nature —See Natural Revelation

Translation —Because God desires all people to know Him and be saved, the Bible must be translated into the everyday languages of every nation. Translation is not optional or merely practical. It is a mandate rooted in God’s own desire for His people to know Him. The original Hebrew and Greek texts carry full divine authority, but God never intended His Word to be locked away behind scholarly barriers. Every person, regardless of education or social standing, deserves access to Scripture in a language they can read and understand.

Transmission —Transmission refers to the process by which the biblical text has been copied and handed down across centuries. Before the printing press, every Bible was copied by hand, one manuscript at a time, across thousands of years and multiple continents. This was an entirely human process involving real scribes who made occasional minor errors.

Vulgar Language —The common, everyday native language spoken by the ordinary, local population of a given nation (such as English, Aramaic, or German, rather than scholarly Latin, Hebrew, or ancient Greek). This is the language into which the scriptures must be translated so the Word can dwell plentifully in all.

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

Whole Counsel of God —The complete, comprehensive scope of God’s revealed truth and purpose contained across all of Scripture.

Worship —The reverent and obedient response of God’s people to His glory, expressed through prayer, praise, the reading and preaching of Scripture, and the sacraments, all according to God’s Word.



LESSON CONTENT



MONERGISM STUDY GUIDE