



THE **WESTMINSTER**
CONFESSIO**N OF FAITH**
IN **EVERYDAY**
LANGUAGE

A Summary of Christian Doctrine
from a Reformed Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

I love Jesus. I love His gospel, the good-news story that tells us how Jesus embodies God's plan to rescue twisted, broken people and the good world in which we live. I love belonging to God's people, the Church, brought into being by this gospel. I love the way that the impacts of this gospel, and therefore the Church, are stretched across every century, every continent, and every demographic.

I love belonging to the part of God's people that has its roots in the theological and spiritual heritage of the Protestant Reformation. I love belonging to a denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, that uses a written confession of faith to summarize our common beliefs.¹ I also love language and thinking deeply about how words do their work in the world.

For all these reasons, I love the document known as the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, written in 1646 by a group of Christian leaders who came together to create a summary of what Scripture teaches about important topics. I even love the original language of this document, with its now-obscure seventeenth century vocabulary and complex sentences that use punctuation to send significant signals about theological belief.

But I hate confusion. As much as I love the *Westminster Confession* in its original language, I hate seeing people frustrated by that language. I have seen people so puzzled by

¹ It may help some readers to know that I've come to these loves over time. I wasn't always a Christian, and my journey of faith in Jesus didn't begin in the Presbyterian tradition.

this document's language, or by its complex grammar, that they get distracted from the beauty of what it says about God and the gospel. I'm sure the Confession was clearer to its first readers—but word meanings and writing styles change significantly over time. As a result, I have seen people grow discouraged as they encounter this incredibly helpful resource, feeling that they don't measure up: that they don't have enough formal theological training, that they can't read well enough, that they somehow aren't "in the club" with people who love these sorts of things.

I love the Confession. I hate the confusion. So, I'm doing something that I hope is helpful and loving. I'm trying to state the meaning of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in language that is easier to read and understand. If you don't need this kind of help, you can ignore this resource. But I think it will be a good thing for the health of the Church, on many levels, if the content of this Confession is accessible to a wider range of people.

The deepest roots of this work ultimately lie in something very personal. When our children were younger, Tricia and I wanted to encourage in them a deep love for the Scriptures. Chapter 1 of the *Westminster Confession* provides one of the richest summaries of what we should believe about the Bible and why. The kids were ready to wrestle with the concepts of this chapter, but not the vocabulary or the writing style. What if we could talk through these great truths in a more conversational style?

If you've ever taught children, you've learned, as I have, that the process of stating familiar truth in new language doubles the number of learners in the room: children learn more as they receive the truth in a form they can grasp, and we learn more as the process pushes us to fine-tune our own understanding. I'm hoping that the work I've done here will stimulate many people to learn more about Scripture through the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. People who don't know this document at all may find this work a helpful "way in"; others who know it well may benefit from being

pushed to reflect on the depths of familiar words and phrases. I'll be honored if this guide can be of help to those who have more expertise in conversational, spoken English than in formal, written English—including people with learning disabilities and people for whom English is not a native language.

Along the way I've done my best to maintain some consistent principles:

- **What something meant vs. what it means.** I learned this principle through my training as an interpreter of the Bible. The *Westminster Confession* is not nearly as important as the Bible, but both are documents written in times, places, and cultures very different from our own. With any such document, we have to do the work of interpretation before we do the work of application. That is, we first need to understand what claims the original writers intended to speak into their own context; only then can we work out what it would mean to believe and live out these claims in our own context. We have to say what the Confession meant before we can say what it means. So, as much as possible, I've tried to faithfully restate what the original writers meant in their own day, reserving comments about present-day perspectives to footnotes.
- **Theological vocabulary.** Every community develops its own specialized vocabulary or jargon. The community of which the *Westminster Confession* was a part when it was written, and to which it has contributed in the years since, is no different. The theological vocabulary of the Confession is often technical (meaning that key words are consistently used with the same, very specific sense), and often draws on Latin-based roots (see the titles of Chapters 11–13, for example). While such specialized vocabulary can be useful for providing a common shorthand, it can also feel like a barrier that stands between the “insider” and the “outsider.” In my paraphrase, I've tried to strike a balance. Sometimes, for the sake of clarity, I

replace (or supplement), a key theological term with a longer explanation. Sometimes I preserve such terms so that a reader can gain some familiarity with language that is part of the Christian tradition in general, and of the Reformation heritage in particular. I've erred on the side of helping those who are less familiar with formal theology, so if I have omitted one of your favorite words, I ask for grace. And we should remember that a concept is not the same as a word: it is possible to love the biblical concept of regeneration, even if we use a different word or phrase to communicate it—just as the concept of the Trinity is woven throughout Scripture, even though that word never appears.

- **Clarity of content vs. number of words.** In many cases, my paraphrase replaces a compact expression with a much longer expansion. Two examples from *Westminster Confession* 2.1 (Chapter 2, Paragraph 1) illustrate well. Where the original text says God is “without . . . passions,” I expand this to say that He is “without passions that dominate Him so that they are beyond His control.” For modern readers, the original phrase could suggest that God doesn't have deep or intense desires; to avoid this impression while capturing the intent of the original takes more words. Later, where the original says very compactly that God is “most absolute,” I've substituted a complete sentence to capture the thought: “He needs no one else's power or permission to be who He is.” These examples show, first, that paraphrases aren't for people who like tidy, one-to-one ratios; and second, that the goal is to help today's readers grasp *the same content* the original writers had in mind with *the same clarity* the original readers would have understood. Some might object that I've lost some of the elegance or precision of the original—and I would agree!—but I think it's worth it to help a wider audience become more familiar with the content of the Confession.

- **Grammatical changes.** Communication styles change over time. To help modern readers, I've consistently made three kinds of grammatical changes.
 - **Implied vs. expressed actors.** In many instances, the Confession uses a word or phrase that expresses an action, without explicitly saying who performs the action—as this can usually be inferred from context. For the sake of clarity, I have often rephrased these in a way that names the actor(s). For example, in 1.2, I paraphrase “the rule of faith and life” (where the nouns “faith” and “life” imply that someone is believing and living), as “the standard for what we should believe and how we should live.” Sometimes I have replaced impersonal phrases with more personal equivalents, as when, earlier in 1.2, “Under the name of Holy Scripture . . . are now contained . . .” becomes, “When we speak of Holy Scripture . . . we are referring to . . .” In many instances, when the implied actor is the Holy Spirit, I have made this explicit: at 6.5, for instance, “people who are given new life by the Holy Spirit” expands the original “those that are regenerated.”
 - **Pronouns and references to the human race.** In many instances, the Confession uses masculine pronouns (*he/him/his*) in a way that is intended to be gender specific. This includes references to particular male persons such as Adam or Jesus, as well as references to God. In these instances, I have preserved the original language. However, in places where the Confession talks about a concept with third person language (*he/him/his* or *they/their*), I have often² introduced *we/our* instead. This has less to do with concern that readers would be confused about whether only males or females are in view (in the original text, it is always clear when the authors

² Not always. See the paraphrase of Chapters 11–12, for example.

are referring to a wide range of people), and more to do with achieving a clear paraphrase in contemporary style. Finally, where the Confession uses *man/men* in a way that is not intended to be gender specific, I have used *humanity/human being(s)*. For examples of all three of these practices, see the paraphrase of 7.1-3: “Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life . . . ,” becomes, “As a result of humanity’s fall into sin, we have made ourselves unable to have life . . . ;” masculine references to God and to Adam remain; and “faith in him” becomes “faith in Jesus” in order to maintain clarity after breaking a longer sentence into several shorter ones.

- **Bullet-point formatting.** The original grammar and style of the Confession packs lots of content into standard sentence and paragraph form. Relationships among thoughts are made clear through careful choice and placement of key words, phrases, and punctuation. While the intent of these nuanced choices was clear to the original writers, it is less clear to many modern readers. I’ve used bullet-point formatting to help readers follow the organization of thought more easily.

In all these principles, I don’t want to lose the main thing: learning what the Scriptures teach should lead us to love Jesus and His gospel. I believe that our love for Him can grow if we better understand and more deeply cherish the teachings of Scripture that are summarized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. If this paraphrase helps you to do these things—learn, love, grow, cherish—then my work, as flawed as it may be, will be richly rewarded.

A special word of thanks goes to my good friend, Sean Lucas, who improved this effort in many ways. He caught many mistakes that I didn’t realize I was making, gently steering me toward better approaches. Most importantly, he enabled me to see when I had inadvertently drifted too far

from the anchor of Scripture or the intention of Confession. Any mistakes that remain are my own responsibility, not his; but the final product reflects more grace and love than it ever could have without his input.



CHAPTER 1

What We Believe Scripture Teaches About Scripture

Paragraph 1

- God shows His goodness, wisdom, and power through the human capacity to reason about the nature of reality, in His work of creating the world, and in His work of providentially caring for and ruling every detail of His creation.⁵ His character is made known so clearly in these ways that no human being has an excuse for refusing to worship Him.
- Still, these ways of learning about God are not enough to give humanity the knowledge of God and His will that we need to experience salvation.⁶
- So, God delighted to reveal Himself, at many different times and in many different ways, and to clearly announce His will to His Church.

⁵ The “human capacity to reason about . . . reality” paraphrases “the light of nature.” For the authors of the Confession, right reasoning about reality would always lead us to see that we owe our existence to a Creator, with reason itself as one indicator that we are made in His image. See Chapters 4–5 for more reflection on God’s works of creation and providence, and Chapter 21.1 for more on the “light of nature.”

⁶ *Salvation* is a word with deep biblical roots. It is often reduced to mean “having our sins forgiven,” “having some kind of powerful conversion experience,” or “dying and going to heaven.” But scripturally, *salvation* means: 1) that human beings have experienced the beginnings of complete spiritual disaster, which will become final and irreversible when we encounter God at death and/or on the great Judgment Day that is yet to come; 2) this disaster results in condemnation for betraying God and breaking His commands, in deep distortion of our souls so that we are not able to love and serve God, and in a world full of misery, suffering, and every form of death; 3) that the only hope we have of being rescued—or *saved*—from this disaster is God’s plan of deliverance, announced in Scripture and accomplished by Jesus.

- God committed all this revelation of Himself and His will to writing. He did this:
 - to more effectively preserve and promote the spread of His truth
 - and to more effectively strengthen and comfort the Church—enabling us to resist both the corrupt desires that come from our flesh⁷ and the hostility of Satan and the world.
- As a result, Holy Scripture is absolutely necessary if we want to know God, because those earlier ways He revealed His will to His people have now ceased.

Paragraph 2

- When we speak of Holy Scripture, or the written Word of God, we are referring to all the books of the Old and New Testament:
 - Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 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, and Malachi.
 - New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts of the Apostles, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.⁸

⁷ For more detail on the corruption of the human heart that results from sin (which Scripture and the Confession often describe as “the flesh”), see Chapters 5–6.

⁸ The original text of the Confession gives more formal titles for New Testament books: “the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles; Paul’s Epistles to the Romans; Corinthians I; Corinthians II,” etc.

- God inspired⁹ the writing of these books and everything that is in them. They are therefore His standard for what we should believe and how we should live.

Paragraph 3

- God did not inspire the writing of the books known as the Apocrypha. Therefore, they are not part of the canon¹⁰ of Scripture.
- This means that among God’s people the Apocrypha should be treated like any other human writings—not given any more authority, or treated with any greater respect, or put to any different use than other human writings would be.

Paragraph 4

- The main reason Holy Scripture should be believed and obeyed is because of its own authority.
- This authority does not come from the testimony of any human being or any church. Instead, Scripture’s authority comes entirely from its author, God—and He is Truth itself.
- This is why Scripture should be recognized and embraced: because it is the Word of God.

Paragraph 5

- The testimony the Church gives is one factor that might cause us to have high regard and reverence for Scripture.
- Several other factors can also provide convincing evidence that Scripture is the Word of God. These include:
 - the spiritual beauty of its contents,

⁹ The words *inspired* and *inspiration*, based on the Latin word for breathing, are vitally important when talking about the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16 says that “All Scripture is breathed out by God.” God superintended the writing of Scripture so closely and carefully that every word is trustworthy and true.

¹⁰ *Canon* comes from a Greek word meaning “measuring rod, standard, rule.” Applied to Scripture, it refers to that collection of writings God has given to reveal Himself and His will—the books that make up the Old and New Testaments. People often conceive of this *canon* as a list of books that the Church declared (perhaps arbitrarily) to be authoritative; instead, the Scriptures envision, and history reflects, a process by which God’s people recognized in these books an authority that God had already given. The concept of the canon of Scripture as a rule or standard runs throughout Chapter 1.

- the persuasiveness of its teaching,
 - its beautiful literary style,
 - the harmony among all its parts,
 - the vast scope of its overall goal—which is to give to God all the glory He deserves,
 - the fact that it fully unveils the only way for human beings to experience salvation,
 - all its other positive qualities, which are beyond comparison,
 - and the fact that it is entirely perfect.
- But despite all this, what fully convinces and assures us that Scripture is infallibly¹¹ true and has divine authority is the work of the Holy Spirit in us, giving His testimony in our hearts. The Spirit does this work by means of God’s Word and with God’s Word.¹²

Paragraph 6

- Whatever is necessary for His glory, for our salvation, for faith, and for life—God wants us to have wisdom about it. All this wisdom is either directly stated in Scripture or can be reasonably deduced from Scripture.
- Nothing should be added to Scripture at any time, whether it comes from new revelations of the Spirit or from human traditions.
- Still, we do acknowledge that God’s Spirit must provide inward illumination of Scripture. Without this illumination¹³ human beings can’t have a saving understanding¹⁴ of the things that are revealed in the Word.

¹¹ To say that Scripture is *infallibly true* means that it will never fail to be true: when we trust it to show us truth about God, ourselves, and our world, it will not lead us astray. It will not cause us to fall or fail in our quest for truth, life, and wholeness.

¹² I take the distinction between the Spirit’s work “by” and “with” God’s Word to mean: 1) the Spirit uses Scripture to work in human hearts (He works “by means of” the Word.); and 2) any time Scripture is read, the Spirit is at work. (He works “along with” the Word.)

¹³ Here, *illumination* means the Spirit’s action of shining light on Scripture, a metaphor for enabling someone to understand not only what Scripture means, but *that this meaning applies to them*. To say this illumination is *inward* means that the Spirit’s work is happening in the human heart (see 1 Corinthians 2:14).

¹⁴ The implication is that human beings can have some level of understanding of Scripture on our own. But to have the kind of understanding that leads to, flows from, and is consistent with salvation (see footnote 2), the Spirit must work.

- We also acknowledge that some of the specific details regarding how worship and church government should happen are not given in Scripture.
 - Instead, these are determined according to common human and societal practice.
 - In these cases, we rely on what we learn by observing the way the world works and on sound Christian judgment—but only to the extent that these agree with the general principles of the Word, which should always be observed.

Paragraph 7

- Not everything in Scripture is equally clear or equally clear to all people.
- But those things that we need to know, believe, and do for salvation are clearly stated and explained somewhere in Scripture.
- In fact, they are stated so clearly that not only highly educated people but people with no formal education can sufficiently understand them—provided they make appropriate use of the ministry of God’s Word in their lives.¹⁵

Paragraph 8

- The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, which was the native language of God’s ancient people. The New Testament was originally written in Greek, which in the first century AD was the language most widely known among the nations of the world. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament were immediately inspired by God.
- These Hebrew and Greek texts have been kept pure across the centuries by God’s remarkable care and providence. Because they are authentic and reliable, they are the final

¹⁵ The phrase “appropriate use . . . lives” paraphrases the original “due use of the ordinary means.” Chad Van Dixhoorn captures the meaning of the phrase: “Our responsibility is to use the Word of God properly—reading it carefully and listening to it prayerfully. . . . For the Spirit delights in using the preaching of the Word, the emblems of the gospel provided in baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and his own answers to prayer to help us understand Scripture” (*Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* [Banner of Truth, 2014], 22).

- court of appeal in all debates about the Christian faith.
- However, God's people have a right to read and examine the Scriptures, because they have a vested interest in what the Scriptures say. In fact, God's people are commanded to read and examine the Scriptures out of reverence and awe for Him.
 - So, because not all God's people know Greek and Hebrew, the Scriptures should be translated into the common language of every nation into which they come so that God's Word may dwell abundantly in all His people. This will enable people to worship Him in the way He finds acceptable, and it will give them hope—a hope sustained by the endurance and comfort that Scripture provides.

Paragraph 9

- The only guide we can trust without fail for interpreting Scripture is Scripture itself.
- This means that whenever there is a question about the correct or complete meaning of any Scripture text (and there are not multiple meanings), we must seek the answer through other Scripture texts that speak more clearly.

Paragraph 10

- There is a supreme Judge by which all debates about the Christian faith should be decided; a Judge by which the decrees of church councils, opinions of ancient writers, human teachings, and private spiritual revelations are to be examined; a Judge and whose verdict is so definitive that we must accept it.
- This Judge is—and can only be—the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture.