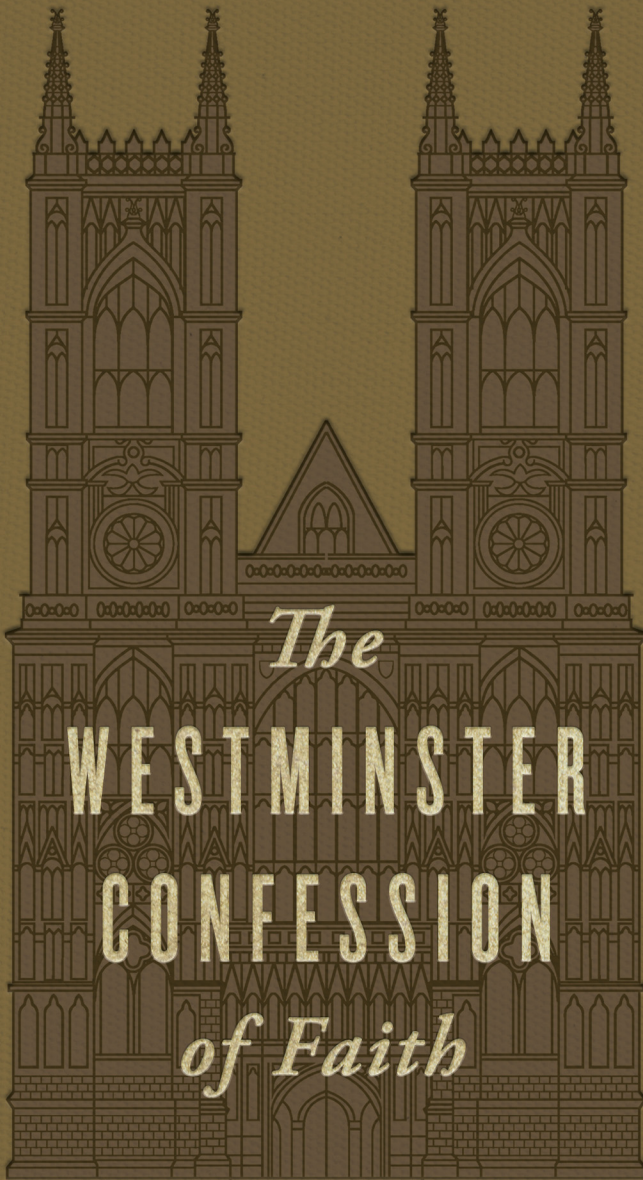


EDITED BY

J. V. Fesko, John R. Muether & D. Blair Smith



A COMPREHENSIVE
COMMENTARY ON ITS HISTORY,
THEOLOGY & APPLICATION

“Defined by doctrinal clarity and replete with rich historical insights, this definitive commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith has just the qualities you might expect from its heavyweight lineup of authors: It is clear, precise, Christ-centered, and applicable for the modern church. Seasoned scholars from Reformed Theological Seminary, these pastor-theologians are some of the finest experts of Reformed theology and the Westminster Assembly alive today. Above all, they repeatedly show why and how each doctrine matters for Christians today. My prayer is that this book will be a tool in the hands of the Spirit to stir up another generation of godly men and women to embrace the doctrine, worship, and experiential piety of the Westminster divines.”

Joel R. Beeke, Chancellor and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics,
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; Pastor, Heritage Reformed
Congregation, Grand Rapids, Michigan

“We have needed this volume for a long time. The authors are not only experts in their field but churchmen. Many younger Christians today are seeking to deepen their understanding of Reformed faith and practice. This comprehensive work displays the scriptural, historical, and (yes) ecumenical character of the Westminster Confession. I expect that it will become the standard commentary for a long time.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and
Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“The Westminster Confession of Faith provides a peerless summary of biblical teaching. It is balanced, carefully worded, and pastorally useful. As such, it should be studied by all Christians. This book’s contributions by faithful scholars from Reformed Theological Seminary will aid in the study and application of that great confessional document. I have every expectation that it will be used by the Lord to illumine the truths contained in the confession and ultimately point men and women to the living and abiding word of God.”

Jonathan L. Master, President, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“This comprehensive commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith represents a significant contribution to contemporary Reformed scholarship. The editors and contributors combine historical depth, doctrinal clarity, and pastoral sensitivity, making the confession’s rich theology accessible for the church today. By situating the confession within the broader catholic tradition while clearly articulating its Reformed distinctives, this work serves as a reliable guide for students, pastors, and scholars alike. It not only deepens understanding but also encourages faithful application of the truths confessed.”

Valdeci Santos, Vice President and Professor of Biblical Counseling and
Missions, Andrew Jumper Graduate Center, Brazil

“This is an excellent and very welcome addition to the growing discussion of the Westminster Assembly and its theology.”

Robert Letham, Senior Research Fellow, Union School of Theology

“This remarkable volume on the Westminster Confession of Faith combines scholarship and devotion suited for the academic, pulpiteer, and person in the pew. No other book I know of does just what this book does and, overall, does it so well. Each of the thirty-three chapters of the confession receives treatment by a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary, and all are first-rate. The editors’ excellent introduction sets the table. All may then dive into the feast. Teachers and students can return time and again as they use this incomparable tool to engage with this great confession for the education of congregations and Christians more broadly.”

Alan D. Strange, President and Professor of Church History, Mid-America Reformed Seminary

“Younger generations often struggle to understand, even to get along with, older ones. Pushing four hundred years since the publication of the Westminster Confession of Faith, our technologically advancing age can promote a theological superiority complex over doctrines written by long-dead Puritans. Focusing on historical meaning as well as biblical-theological content and application, the authors in this volume help us mind our elders, learning from them as our ministers while calling Christ alone Master. Drawing special attention to the Westminster Assembly’s *Annotations* on Scripture, this worthy volume invites us to see why the theology of the Westminster Standards is by no means outdated.”

Ryan M. McGraw, Morton H. Smith Professor of Systematic Theology, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“This collection of essays is a welcome contribution to the growing body of commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith. The chapters display a rich variety of focus and depth, and many will serve as standout guides for those engaged in teaching the confession. The shared institutional context of the contributors lends the volume a measure of coherence that will be appreciated by its readers.”

Drew Martin, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Fesko, Muether, and Smith have gathered first-rate scholars to produce first-rate essays on a first-rate Reformed confession. Theologically incisive, historically informed, and often pastorally minded, this comprehensive commentary will prove standard, if not definitive, for our understanding of the Westminster Confession for the foreseeable future. A must-have for pastors, those studying for ecclesiastical exams, and everyone who loves the Westminster Standards.”

Harrison Perkins, Pastor, Oakland Hills Community Church, Farmington Hills, Michigan

“Numerous commentaries on the Westminster Confession of Faith have been published since the seventeenth century. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, but only some remained in widespread use. I expect this new commentary by the faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary to be among those that stand the test of time. Although a multi-authored resource, it does not suffer from widely varying levels of quality. Every chapter is excellent. This is a truly outstanding resource to be read and studied prayerfully.”

Keith A. Mathison, Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformation Bible College

The Westminster Confession of Faith

The Westminster Confession of Faith

*A Comprehensive Commentary on Its
History, Theology, and Application*

EDITED BY

J. V. Fesko, John R. Muether,
and D. Blair Smith

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WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Comprehensive Commentary on Its History, Theology, and Application

© 2026 by John Valero Fesko, John R. Muether, and D. Blair Smith

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To the many faithful women and men
who comprise the staff of Reformed Theological Seminary
across its nine campuses,
who make our work and this book possible—
Sine qua non

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Abbreviations

<i>Annotations</i>	<i>Annotations upon All the Books of the Old and New Testament Wherein the Text Is Explained, Doubts Resolved, Scriptures Paralleled, and Various Readings Observed by the Joynt-Labour of Certain Learned Divines, Therefore unto Appointed, and Therein Employed</i> , 3rd ed. (London, 1657).
DPW	Directory for the Publick Worship of God
DPW	<i>A Directory for the Publique Worship of God</i> (London, 1645).
DS	Heinrich Denzinger, <i>Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum. Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals</i> , revised, enlarged, and, in collaboration with Helmut Hoping, ed. Peter Hünermann for the original bilingual edition, ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash for the English edition, 43rd ed. (Ignatius, 2012). Sections are numbered according to the reference system developed by Denzinger and (Adolf) Schönmetzer.
LXX	Septuagint
NPNF ¹	<i>The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , series 1, ed. Philip Schaff, 14 vols. (1886–1889; repr., Hendrickson, 1994).
NPNF ²	<i>The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 14 vols. (1890–1900; repr., Hendrickson, 1994).

Van Dixhoorn, ed., <i>MPWA</i>	Chad Van Dixhoorn, ed., <i>The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652</i> , 5 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2012).
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism

Introduction

J. V. Fesko, John R. Muether, and D. Blair Smith

REFORMED THEOLOGY of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries finds its most detailed and best-known expression in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Richard Baxter (1615–1691) said of the assembly that produced the Westminster Standards, “The Christian world, since the days of the Apostles never had a Synod of more excellent divines.”¹ Parliament originally called an assembly of theologians in 1643, amid its civil war with King Charles I (1600–1649). Initially commissioned to revise the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1571), it went on to produce a remarkable collection of writings. Over a decade later, it had penned a confession of faith,² two catechisms, and attending documents, all for—in the words of the Solemn League and Covenant (1643)—

the preservation of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, against our common enemies; the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, according to the word of GOD, and the example of the best reformed Churches.³

- 1 William Orme, *The Life and Times of Richard Baxter: With a Critical Examination of His Writings* (London, 1830), 86.
- 2 *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines, Now by Authority of Parliament Sitting at Westminster, Concerning a Confession of Faith* (London, 1647). For brief histories of the Westminster Assembly, see, e.g., William Beveridge, *A Short History of the Westminster Assembly* (T&T Clark, 1904); W. M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh, 1843); Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (P&R, 2009).
- 3 *A Solemne League and Covenant for Reformation and Defence of Religion* (Edinburgh, 1643).

The assembly initially consisted of appointees that included a cross section of ministers and theologians, ten representatives from the House of Lords, twenty representatives from the House of Commons, and six representatives from the Church of Scotland, though the Scots did not have voting rights. Although 199 participants were appointed to the assembly, the average attendance was about seventy-five. The assembly met from 1643 until 1656, publishing the Westminster Confession and Larger Catechism in 1647 and the Shorter Catechism in 1648.⁴

Even though the confession has a reputation of being the decisively Presbyterian document representing English and Scottish Reformed theology, the assembly resourced numerous theologians from every age of the church and many confessional documents, including the *Harmony of Reformed Confessions*, compiled under the editorial leadership of Theodore Beza (1519–1605), which was a collection of eight Reformed confessions (the First Helvetic, Second Helvetic, French, Belgic, Tetrapolitan, and Bohemian Confessions, the First Confession of Basel, and John Jewel’s [1522–1571] *Summary of the Doctrine of the English Church*) and three Lutheran confessions (the Augsburg, Saxony, and Württemberg).⁵ In addition to these confessional documents, the assembly naturally consulted the Thirty-Nine Articles because the divines (a seventeenth-century plural for *theologian*) were originally tasked with revising them. They also employed the Irish Articles of Religion (1615), written by James Ussher (1581–1656), the archbishop of the Irish Reformed Church. In fact, the Westminster Confession, in several places, copies entire statements straight from the Irish Articles.⁶

In thirty-three chapters, beginning with natural revelation and ending with the final judgment, the confession follows the structure of the Apostles’ Creed, which was valued as an excellent summary of the Christian faith among Reformed churches. The Second Helvetic Confession (1566), written by Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) of Zurich, for example, commended the Apostles’ Creed “because it delivers to us the true faith” (chap. 3).⁷ Table 1

4 John R. Bower, *The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Reformation Heritage, 2020), 3–27.

5 Bower, *The Confession of Faith*, 38–49; also Van Dixhoorn, ed., *MPWA* 1:148–61.

6 See, e.g., B. B. Warfield, “The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture,” in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. E. D. Warfield, 10 vols. (1931; repr., Baker, 1981), 6:169–90.

7 Second Helvetic Confession, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., 4 vols. (Reformation Heritage, 2008–2014), 2:814.

shows the parallel structures of the two as the confession articulates the teaching of the creed in great detail.

Table 1

Apostles' Creed	Westminster Confession of Faith
God the Father	Scripture (1) God, Trinity (2)
Maker of heaven and earth	eternal decree (3) creation (4) providence (5) fall, sin (6)
Jesus Christ	God's covenant (7) Christ (8)
	free will (9)
Holy Ghost	effectual calling (10) justification (11) adoption (12) sanctification (13) saving faith (14) repentance (15) good works (16) perseverance (17) assurance (18)
	law of God (19) Christian liberty (20) worship (21) oaths (22) magistrate (23) marriage (24)
holy catholic church	the church (25)
communion of saints	communion of saints (26)
	sacraments (27–29) censures (30) councils (31)
forgiveness of sins	(no separate chapter)
resurrection of the body	resurrection (32)
life everlasting	last judgment (33)

Even though the confession is a Reformed document, we must remember the nature of the Protestant Reformation—namely, that it was a *reform* movement. This means that many elements of the confession are catholic—that is, doctrines confessed by the universal church throughout the ages.⁸ We can say, for example, that there is nothing uniquely Reformed about the doctrines of God, the Trinity, creation, or Christ. The confession joins hands with the catholic church in professing these doctrines. The confession, of course, contains signature Reformed doctrines, such as the doctrine of salvation, which includes justification *sola fide* (by faith alone). Its treatment of worship and the church are also distinctly Reformed in contrast to Roman Catholic views. At the same time, the uniquely Reformed aspects of the confession are not novel but represent the recovery of the very best teaching of the ancient church. In this vein, the confession is both catholic and Reformed and is one of the best confessional documents in the Reformed tradition, a document that deserves careful study and reflection. While the confession's truths may be familiar to many, readers must pay attention to its words and phrasing so they can have both a deeper understanding of what the Westminster Assembly produced and a greater appreciation for the carefully crafted confession that it is.

Over the years theologians and historians have thus written books and commentaries on the Westminster Confession to help readers, from neophytes to advanced, better understand the document. One of the earliest was written by Scottish Presbyterian theologian David Dickson (1583–1663), *Truth's Victory over Error* (1684), which was a basic overview of the confession's teaching.⁹ In the nineteenth century two popular commentaries on the confession were written by Robert Shaw (1795–1863) and A. A. Hodge (1823–1886).¹⁰ In the more recent past, a number of commentaries were written at a popular level, including contributions from G. I. Williamson (1925–2023), Rowland Ward, R. C. Sproul (1939–2017), and Chad Van

8 J. Todd Billings, "Afterword: Rediscovering the Catholic-Reformed Tradition for Today: A Biblical, Christ-Centered Vision for Church Renewal," in *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, by Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Baker Academic, 2015), 143–62.

9 David Dickson, *Truths Victory over Error* (Edinburgh, 1684).

10 Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, 4th ed. (London, 1850); Archibald Alexander Hodge, *A Commentary on the Confession of Faith: With Questions for Theological Students and Bible Classes* (Philadelphia, 1869).

Dixhoorn, among others.¹¹ In addition to these commentaries, numerous specialized studies have focused on the theology or specific doctrines contained within the confession; these studies have targeted an academic audience: pastors, seminary students, and scholars seeking to understand the history, theology, and abiding significance of the confession.¹² There seem to be two extremes: Some are for the person in the pew, and others aim for the theologically informed reader. Both approaches have merit; all Presbyterians should be students of their confessional standard, while theologically trained students and scholars ought to dive deeper into its intricacies.

This commentary seeks the middle ground of providing accessible commentary on the confession while exploring the history, doctrine, and abiding relevance of the document. In other words, this volume's contributors, all members of the faculty at Reformed Theological Seminary, strive for this balance. They write at an accessible level so that people in the church can learn more about the confession. They also treat issues related to the historical context of the document, connections to early, medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation theology, as well as issues related to the ongoing theological relevance of the confession in the light of present-day concerns. So this commentary is not solely popular, purely academic, or primarily historical. Rather, it aims to address these various aspects of commentary writing as contributors deem fitting. While accessibility is a goal, contributors dive into more technical issues as each chapter requires, and they cite a panoply of literature in the footnotes to provide students of the confession more information if they want to pursue a deeper study of the issues.

Each chapter begins with the title provided in the confession and offers corresponding references, where available, to the Larger and Shorter Catechisms (which, together with the confession, are considered collectively as

11 G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, 2nd ed. (P&R, 2003); Rowland Ward, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Study Guide for the 21st Century* (Tulip, 2021); R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Systematic Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Ligonier Ministries, 2019); Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Banner of Truth, 2014).

12 E.g., Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*; J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards* (Crossway, 2014); Ligon Duncan, ed., *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, 3 vols. (Mentor, 2003–2009).

the Westminster Standards). Though the assembly of divines also composed a directory for public worship and a form of government, this commentary focuses on the confession and makes reference to these other documents as warranted.¹³ This commentary primarily uses an edition of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms found in *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, edited by Chad Van Dixhoorn, which mirrors the texts adopted by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America.¹⁴ If contributors refer to other editions of the confession, they indicate such. Special attention is devoted to where American Presbyterians revised the confession. Unless otherwise indicated, excerpts from other creeds, confessions, and catechisms are likewise from the Van Dixhoorn compilation.

Unless otherwise indicated, “proof texts” refers to biblical citations added later by the divines themselves at the direction of Parliament.

A word of introduction is fitting for one other key source that contributors have consulted. Parliament published a verse-by-verse, whole-Bible commentary published in 1645.¹⁵ A second edition was released in 1651 and modified in 1655 with changes to Genesis, then a full third edition in 1657, followed by another volume of annotations in 1658. This work was popularly known as *The Assembly’s Annotations* or *English Annotations* to distinguish it from other whole-Bible commentaries, such as the *Dutch Annotations*, commissioned by the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) and the commentary by Giovanni Diodati (1576–1649).¹⁶ The Westminster

13 *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines, Now by Authority of Parliament Sitting at Westminster Concerning a Larger Catechism* (London, 1647); *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines Now by Authority of Parliament Sitting at Westminster Concerning a Shorter Catechism* (London, 1648); *A Directory for the Publique Worship of God Throughout the Three Kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London, 1645); *The Form of Church-Government to Be Used in the Church of England and Ireland: Agreed upon by the Lords and Commons Assembled in Parliament, After Advice Had with the Assembly of Divines* (London, 1648).

14 *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn (Crossway, 2022), 183–236; Orthodox Presbyterian Church (Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005); Presbyterian Church in America (PCA Stated Clerk’s Office and Christian Education and Publications, 2007).

15 *Annotations upon All the Books of the Old and New Testament Wherein the Text Is Explained, Doubts Resolved, Scriptures Paralleled, and Various Readings Observed by the Joynt-Labour of Certain Learned Divines, Therefore unto Appointed, and Therein Employed* (London, 1645).

16 Theodore Haak, ed., *The Dutch Annotations upon the Whole Bible: or All the Holy Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament* (London, 1657); John Diodati, *Pious and Learned Annotations upon the Holy Bible: Plainly Expounding the Most Difficult Places Thereof*, 2nd ed. (London, 1648).

Assembly did not formally appoint divines to create the commentary. Rather, Parliament did, though several Westminster divines were among the contributors: John Downname (1571–1652) as general editor; John Ley (1583–1662), who commented on the Pentateuch and four Gospels; William Gouge (1575–1653), who explained 1 Kings through Esther; Meric Casaubon (1599–1671), who treated the Psalms; Francis Taylor (1589–1656) on Proverbs; Edward Reynolds (1599–1676) on Ecclesiastes; a Mr. Smallwood on Song of Solomon; Thomas Gataker (1574–1654) on Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lamentations and portions of Genesis; a Mr. Pemberton on Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets in the first edition; Daniel Featley (1582–1645) on the Pauline Epistles; John Richardson (1580–1654) on Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets, in the second edition; James Ussher on portions of Genesis in the 1655 edition; and John Reading (1588–1667). Ley, Gouge, Taylor, Reynolds, Gataker, and Featley were members of the assembly.¹⁷ Contributors to this commentary employ the third, or 1657, edition to showcase how Reformed theologians associated with the confession explain Scripture. In this capacity, the *Annotations* provide representative exegesis of the period to help readers understand how seventeenth-century English Puritans interpreted the Bible, even if not all were commissioned divines.¹⁸

In the end, we aim to achieve several goals in this commentary on the confession. First, we seek to explain the theology of the confession, illuminating it from the history and theology of the early church to the post-Reformation period. We want the church to know what the confession meant in its original context. Second, our aim is to make the confession accessible to the church. For many, the confession sits nestled in the back of hymnals; how often do Christians pick it up, read, and understand it? Our hope is for that number to increase. Third, we do not merely invite readers to an exercise in visiting the historical-theological past, as if on a museum

17 “The English Bible,” in *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, ed. George Watson, 5 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1974), 1:1857; Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, *Holy Scripture* (Baker Academic, 2003), 91. See also Dean George Lampros, “A New Set of Spectacles: The Assembly’s *Annotations*, 1645–1657,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 19, no. 4 (1995): 33–46.

18 *Annotations upon All the Books of the Old and New Testament Wherein the Text Is Explained, Doubts Resolved, Scriptures Paralleled, and Various Readings Observed by the Joynt-Labour of Certain Learned Divines, Therefore unto Appointed, and Therein Employed*, 3rd ed. (London, 1657).

tour—gawking at doctrinal oddities behind plexiglass cases of time. Rather, for officers in Presbyterian churches that subscribe to the Westminster Standards, the confession represents a faithful and careful tracing of the “system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.”¹⁹ Likewise, parents of covenant children vow “to teach diligently . . . the principles of our holy Christian faith, revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and summarized in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms.”²⁰ Parents can teach their children from the Shorter Catechism, but if they want a deeper understanding of the truths they instill in their children, they need to study the confession.

Fourth, as much as the Westminster Confession is a Presbyterian doctrinal symbol, we do not affirm that parochially. Contributors therefore seek to teach readers that the confession is catholic; that is, it codifies truths professed by the universal church. Again, there is no unique Reformed doctrine of God or of the Trinity, for example. The theology of the patristic and medieval church informs many of the confession’s chapters. As Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) once observed, “Irenaeus, Augustine, and Thomas do not belong exclusively to Rome; they are Fathers and Doctors to whom the whole Christian church has obligations.” Bavinck lamented that all too often readers of the confession “know far too little about what we have in common with Rome and what divides us.”²¹ Conversely, when readers understand the catholicity of the confession, they can then appreciate what makes the document uniquely Reformed. The confession is also ecumenical because it found wide acceptance among Congregationalists and Particular Baptists in the seventeenth century, as two different groups of theologians adapted the confession according to their theological convictions, producing the Savoy Declaration (1658) and the Second London Confession (1689).²² Thus the Westminster Confession is relevant to Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists.

19 E.g., *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2020), 35; *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, 2023), 21–5.

20 *Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 145.

21 Herman Bavinck, “Foreword to the First Edition (Volume 1) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 9.

22 For the Savoy Declaration and Second London Confession, see Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 4:457–95, 531–71.

Fifth, the Westminster Confession is eminently valuable for believers seeking to live the Christian life faithfully. Its teaching touches everyday life in too many places to count. Predestination, for example, is a “matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God” that is supposed to engender “humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel” (3.8). God’s providence falls especially upon the church as he disposes “all things to the good thereof” (5.7). In the state of glory, Christians are “made perfectly and immutably free to good alone” (9.5), and as such are utterly unshackled from the bonds of sin. Those saved by the triune God are consoled by the “immutability of the decree of election,” rest in the “efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ,” and know of the comforting “abiding of the Spirit” (17.2). All these things not only serve as vital signposts of God’s love and mercy but also prepare us for the ultimate goal of our salvation, where we “behold the face of God, in light and glory” (32.1). Or in the words of the Larger Catechism, we are “filled with inconceivable joys, made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul, in the company of innumerable saints and holy angels, but especially in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity” (q. 90). Each contributor labors to draw out the doctrine and practice that forms the warp and woof of each line of the confession.

Thus, in explaining the confession’s theology in an accessible manner, highlighting its catholicity and ecumenical nature, and commending its practicality, we wish to provide readers with a deeper understanding of this great symbol of the seventeenth-century Reformed tradition. Through careful study of the confession, we can sit at the feet of some of the church’s greatest theological minds and stand upon their shoulders to gain a greater glimpse of the glory of our triune God through the Father, who sends the Son to save sinners, and through the Father and Son, who both send the Spirit to sanctify and apply Christ’s work.

Of the Holy Scripture

(WLC 3–5; WSC 2–3)

Robert J. Cara

“OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE” is an impressive opening chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. B. B. Warfield (1851–1921) declared WCF 1 to be “the most complete, the most admirable, the most perfect statement of the essential Christian doctrine of Holy Scripture which has ever been formed by man.”¹

Should a confession begin with God and then treat Scripture, or the converse? The Reformed tradition includes both options.² Choosing one over the other is not significant because each option implies the other. To have a high view of Scripture requires a high view of the God who reveals himself. To have a high view of God is to believe what the Scriptures say about God, which includes that God will convince

¹ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 111. Elsewhere, Warfield says, “There is certainly in the whole mass of confessional literature no more nobly conceived or ably wrought-out statement of doctrine than the chapter ‘Of the Holy Scripture’” (*The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* [Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959], 155). Similarly, Schaff (1819–1893) says, “No other Protestant symbol has such a clear, judicious, concise, and exhaustive statement of this fundamental article of Protestantism” (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. [repr., Baker, 1985], 1:767).

² E.g., beginning with God and then Scripture: French Confession (1559), Belgic Confession (1561), and Thirty-Nine Articles (Latin, 1563; English, 1571). Beginning with Scripture and then God: Irish Articles (1615) and Second Helvetic Confession (1566).

believers that the Scriptures are from him (WCF 1.5).³ Of course, for WCF 1 the divines begin with Scripture. For the two catechisms, the divines begin with man's chief end, and then immediately move to a few questions related to Scripture (WLC 3–5; WSC 2–3), which overlap with portions of WCF 1.

Often when the Reformed tradition discusses Scripture, it focuses on various properties or attributes of Scripture—for example, the authority of Scripture. Most of these attributes are affirmed in the broad, historic Christian tradition but have been fine-tuned by the Reformed, especially in opposition to the Roman Catholic view espoused by the Council of Trent.⁴ Although the exact names, definitions, and number of attributes differ slightly among the Reformed, the overall theology of Scripture is quite consistent.⁵ As to attribute names, the sections within WCF 1 could be categorized as *necessity* (1.1), *authority* (1.4–5), *sufficiency* (1.6), and *perspicuity* (1.7).⁶

Who are some of the theological opponents countered by this chapter? As just mentioned above, Roman Catholics are the primary opponent. But others include “enthusiasts” or Quakers (who disconnect the Spirit from Scripture), Socinians and some Arminians (who deny or downgrade “good and necessary consequence”), and at least one aspect of the Thirty-Nine Articles (reading the Apocrypha in worship). On the other hand, one should not overlay the opponents, because the topics discussed in

3 So also Cornelius Van Til: “So it makes very little difference whether we begin with the notion of an absolute God or the notion of an absolute Bible. The one is derived from the other. They are together involved in the Christian view of life” (*A Survey of Christian Epistemology* [Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977], 12). To use technical terms, the Reformed tradition emphasizes two principles (*principia*) or foundations of theology that imply each other: (1) Scripture is the cognitive foundation (*principium cognoscendi*), and (2) God is the ground of all being, that is, the essential foundation (*principium essendi*). See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2017), 288–89.

4 Two decrees within the one “session” at the Council of Trent relate directly to Scripture: session 4 on April 8, 1546, includes the decrees related to Scripture and the Vulgate (DS 1501–8; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:79–83).

5 For a listing of the various attributes used by Reformers and post-Reformation Reformers, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, *Holy Scripture* (Baker, 2003), 297–300.

6 For a standard Reformed discussion of these attributes, see Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Baker Academic, 2003), 454–94.

WCF 1 are appropriate to a well-balanced view of Scripture, no matter the opponents.

What sources did the divines use? At the concept level, WCF 1 reflects the broad consensus of the Reformed tradition.⁷ More specifically, I assume that William Whitaker's 1588 work against the supporters of the Council of Trent was especially influential.⁸ As to the exact wording of chapter 1, the only substantively identifiable source is the Irish Articles (1615), 1–6.

We move now to discussing each paragraph specifically.

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.

This paragraph broadly and quickly covers various aspects of God's revelation with the goal of emphasizing the *necessity* of Scripture.

⁷ See discussion in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:87–92. E.g., the Colloquy of Thorn (in Poland) was held in 1645. The Reformed Declaration of Thorn's chapter on Scripture (chap. 1) has many similarities to WCF 1. For a translation, see James T. Dennison Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, 4 vols. (Reformation Heritage, 2008–2014), 4:208–9.

⁸ William Whitaker (1548–1595) considered six “questions” explicitly in opposition to Trent and Ballarmine: “number of canonical books” (include the Apocrypha?), “authentic edition” (Vulgate or original languages?), “authority” (Scripture or church? and whether Scripture is *autopistic*), “perspicuity” (Should laymen read Scripture, or are priests needed to interpret?), “interpretation” (one sense or multiple senses?), and “perfection” (Is Scripture sufficient or are unwritten traditions needed?). All these topics (“questions”) are addressed in WCF 1. See *A Disputation on Holy Scripture, Against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton* (1588), trans. William Fitzgerald (Cambridge, 1849; repr., Wipf and Stock, 2004), vii.

WCF 1.1 begins with what is now termed *general revelation*. This includes God's revealing aspects of himself and his will to all in three ways: (1) All people understand aspects of God by simply being made in his image; that is, God has imprinted this knowledge in humans (Acts 17:28; Rom. 2:14–15; WCF 4.2). This is an internal witness, part of our consciousness. For example, humans are made to know that God exists and that murder is wrong. Calvin calls this the “seed of religion” that God has “sown” in all.⁹ The divines here term it the “light of nature” (although elsewhere in the Westminster Standards, they use “light of nature” with a broader definition to include all general revelation).¹⁰ (2) God reveals himself through “the works of creation.” That is, the created universe declares to all that the God of the Bible exists and has various attributes (Ps. 19:1–6; Rom. 1:19–20). (3) God also reveals himself through “the works of . . . providence” in his governing of the universe. The way the universe operates reveals aspects of God and his will (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17; WCF 5.4). These three work in concert to show God's “goodness, wisdom, and power” objectively. Of course, owing to sin, many reject this general revelation and have only a confused knowledge of God. Nevertheless, this general revelation reveals enough about God and his will to render people guilty, or as the divines say, “to leave men unexcusable” (cf. Rom. 1:21–2:1; WCF 10.4; WLC 60; Belgic Confession, art. 2).

However, even if one does not reject general revelation, it is still “not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster, 1960), 1.4.1. Calvin also used the phrase *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity) for the same concept (1.3.1).

10 The expression “light of nature” occurs in WCF 1.1, 6; 10.4; 20.4; 21.1; WLC 2, 60, 121, 151. Often it has a broader use to include all general revelation (e.g., WCF 1.6; 21.1). However, like WCF 1.1, WLC 2 uses “light of nature” in a more restricted way as an internal witness: “The very light of nature *in man*, and the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God.” With language similar to WCF 1.1 and WLC 2, John Owen (1616–1683) differentiates God's revealing “himself by his *works*, both creation and providence” from how “God [also] declares himself . . . in the innate (or ingrafted) *light of nature*, and principles of the consciences of men” (*Of the Divine Original, Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 16 vols. [1850–1853; repr., Banner of Truth, 1965–1968], 16:309–10, emphasis his). The *Annotations* also distinguish, at least at one place, between the “light of nature in their consciences, and . . . the consideration of the creature of God, whereby his attributes are evidently notified” (*Annotations*, on Rom. 1:19).

unto salvation.” Hence, the need for what is now termed *special revelation*. In addition to general revelation, God reveals himself and his will in special ways to communicate verbally with his people—for example, through dreams, direct speech, prophets, and Scripture. But the divines put a special emphasis on the necessity of Scripture. They gave three reasons: (1) “better preserving and propagating of the truth,” (2) “the more sure establishment and comfort of the church” against her enemies, and (3) “those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.” Because of these three, God had this special revelation “commit[ted] . . . unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary.”¹¹ Thus, for the divines, all God’s verbal communication is special revelation, but with the completion of the New Testament, Scripture is “most necessary” for salvation (Heb. 1:1–2).

Several implications flow from the phrase “those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.” Backhandedly, it argues against a Roman Catholic view of a too high an authority of unwritten traditions, ecumenical councils, and papal decisions. This phrase also argues against “enthusiasts” (e.g., Quakers), who at the time of the Westminster Assembly believed that God often spoke through the Holy Spirit without any connection to Scripture and who thus maintained that God’s “former ways” had not ceased.¹² Related to the confession’s cessationist wording are its subsequent statements that no “new revelations of the Spirit” may be added to Scripture (1.6) and that “private spirits” must answer to “the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” (1.10). See those locations for more discussion.

2. Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament, which are these:

- 11 The term “scripture(s)” refers to what is written. The New Testament uses the singular and plural of the noun *graphē* (translated as “Scripture” or “Scriptures”) fifty times, and in all instances it refers to Scripture or a portion of it (e.g., John 2:22; 5:39; Acts 1:16; 17:2). The Latin Vulgate translates it as *scriptura*.
- 12 Connecting to “enthusiasts,” see David Dickson (1583–1663), *Truth’s Victory over Error: A Commentary on the Confession of Faith*, ed. John R. de Witt (Banner of Truth, 2007), 2–3; Thomas Watson (ca. 1620–1686), *A Body of Divinity Contained in Sermons upon the Westminster Assembly’s Catechism* (Banner of Truth, 1965), 33; James Fisher (1697–1775), *The Assembly’s Shorter Catechism Explained by Way of Question and Answer* (Berith, 1998), 24.

OF THE OLD TESTAMENT:

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

OF THE NEW TESTAMENT:

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

All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.

The divines do not use the term *Bible* anywhere in the Standards. Terms they do use to refer to the Bible in WCF 1.2 are “Holy Scripture,” “Word of God written,”¹³ and “books of the Old and New Testaments” (cf. WLC 3; WSC 2).

The books of the Bible “are given by inspiration of God.” As to the particularities of inspiration, only a few, but important, details are given. Inspiration is what God does, and the result is that the books are the “Word of God written.” Also, these books cannot be categorized as solely “human writings” (WCF 1.3). Obviously, the divines considered the Scriptures to be written by humans, as many of the names of the books explicitly state, but the divines also believed the books were ultimately the writings of God, who is “the author thereof” (1.4) and who “immediately inspired” the books (1.8). How this process actually occurred, however, is not spelled out.

The Scriptures are the “rule of faith and life.” Elsewhere in the Standards the language used is “rule of faith, or practice” (WCF 31.3), the “only rule of faith and obedience” (WLC 3), and the “only rule” of “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man” (WSC 2, 3). Scripture is the rule or “canon” (WCF 1.3), the ultimate authority for believers and the church (cf. 1.6, 10). Warfield perceptively notes that the divines do not say that the Scriptures speak truthfully only about faith and practice. The Scriptures speak “principally” (WLC 5; WSC 3) about these, but Scripture is truthful in all it says (e.g., about history) because it is written by God “who is truth itself” (WCF 1.4).¹⁴

A listing of the biblical books is not unusual for a confession. A list is included in, for example, Trent, session 4; the French Confession of Faith, article 3; the Belgic Confession, article 4; the Thirty-Nine Articles, article 6 (only Old Testament books); and the Irish Articles, article 2. Trent’s list includes the apocryphal books, and the remainder do not (see WCF 3). Otherwise the lists match, excepting differing names for some books.¹⁵ A few differences are worth mentioning because they imply specific human authors. For example, the Belgic Confession reads “the three books of

¹³ Elsewhere in the Standards, the “word of God written” is often referred to as the “Word of God” (e.g., WCF 22.7; WLC 157; WSC 99) or occasionally as simply the “Word” (e.g., WCF 1.5; WLC 155, 156). The Standards also connect “preached” to the “Word of God” (WLC 158, 159, 160).

¹⁴ Warfield, *Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, 202–3.

¹⁵ E.g., the Irish Articles simply have “The five books of Moses” and do not list them. Trent has “the Canticle of Canticles”; the French Confession, “Song of Solomon”; and the Thirty-Nine Articles, “Cantica or Songs of Solomon.”

Solomon: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs.” WCF 1.2 simply lists the three books. Several confessions explicitly include Hebrews as one of the epistles of Paul (e.g., Trent, original edition of the Belgic Confession, Irish Articles). WCF 1.2 clearly does not assert that Paul wrote Hebrews (neither does the French Confession), but an individual divine may affirm Pauline authorship, as the wording “The Epistle to the Hebrews” does not explicitly deny it.¹⁶

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.

What are the “books commonly called Apocrypha”? The apocryphal books listed in Trent are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, the (first) two books of Maccabees, (additions to) Esther, and (additions to) Daniel.¹⁷ The same list is in the 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church, section 120. Roman Catholics do not use the term *Apocrypha*, a Protestant designation of these and a few other books.¹⁸

WCF 1.3 is the obvious implication of 1.2. The Council of Trent, session 4, included apocryphal books as part of the canon, and the Westminster divines did not. The divines considered the apocryphal books as having no “divine inspiration” and thus as “no part of the canon of the Scripture.” They are simply “human writings.”

This paragraph’s clear polemic against the Roman Catholic canon also serves as a subtle polemic against the Church of England’s practice of

16 Calvin was well known for denying Pauline authorship of Hebrews. John Owen and William Gouge (member of the assembly) favored it. William Whitaker was unsure. For citations, see Robert J. Cara, *Hebrews: A Mentor Commentary* (Mentor, 2024), 6nn21–22, 7n25. The *Annotations* affirm Pauline authorship but do add that “there is some controversie about the Author of this Epistle” (*Annotations*, on Heb. “The Argument”).

17 DS 1502; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:81. In 1442, prior to the Council of Trent (1546), the bull *Cantate Domino* listed the same apocryphal books as part of the canon (DS 1335).

18 Additional books beyond the Trent list that are often considered Apocrypha are 3–4 Maccabees, 3–4 Ezra//1–2 Esdras, Prayer of Manasseh, and Psalm 151. The term “apocrypha” comes from the Greek adjective *apokryphos*, “hidden,” “hard to understand” (Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [University of Chicago Press, 2000], 204).

reading from apocryphal books in a worship service.¹⁹ In fact, the Thirty-Nine Articles 6 (Latin, 1563; English, 1571) comments on the apocryphal books, “The Church doth read [them] for example of the life and instruction of manners; but yet doth not apply them to establish any doctrine” (English spelling updated).²⁰ The 1615 Irish Articles 3 has very similar wording: “The Church doth read them as Books containing many worthy things for example of life and instruction of manners” (Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:527). The Westminster divines’ subtle objection to reading from the apocryphal books in worship is seen (1) by the wording “nor to be any otherwise approved, *or made use of*, than other human writings” and (2) by the absence of wording from the Thirty-Nine Articles and Irish Articles concerning the reading of these books.²¹ For the divines, reading from apocryphal books in worship confuses the issue of canon, even if one formally says doctrine cannot be derived from these books.

WCF 1.3 gives no rationale for why the apocryphal books are not canonical. Typical arguments made by Reformed scholars post-Trent through the mid-seventeenth century included the following: (1) Since Trent was the first council to declare the apocryphal books as canon, the lateness of this declaration argues against its being true. (2) The apocryphal books were not written in Hebrew. (3) The Jews did not and still do not agree that these books are Scripture. (4) The New Testament never cites these books. (5) Malachi was the last prophet. (6) There are obvious historical and doctrinal errors in apocryphal books.²²

¹⁹ John Lightfoot (1602–1675), a member of the assembly, reports in his *Journals* that the assembly resolved “that it should be represented to the Parliament by way of humble advice that the Apocrypha should be no more read in the churches. [And] that it be likewise represented in the same manner that they should be no more bound with the Bibles” (session 16, Tuesday p.m., August 1, 1643, Chad Van Dixhoorn, *John Lightfoot’s Journals of the Westminster Assembly* [Oxford University Press, 2023], 45). About two centuries later, Robert Shaw (1795–1863) noted the continued confusion caused in the Church of England over reading the apocryphal books in worship. He praised WCF 1.3 for its stand on this issue (*Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* [1845; repr., Christian Heritage, 1998], 43–44).

²⁰ The Thirty-Nine Articles and the Irish Articles add to Trent’s list 3–4 Ezra, and the Prayer of Manasseh to be read in a worship service.

²¹ This point is confirmed by noting that the remainder of Irish Articles 3 has wording very similar to WCF 1.3.

²² For these arguments, see, e.g., Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 25–109; James Ussher (1581–1656), *A Body of Divinity: Being the Sum and Substance of Christian Religion*, ed. Michael Nevarr (Solid Ground, 2007), 11–13; Dickson, *Truths Victory over Error*, 7–8.

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.

These two paragraphs both concern the authority of Scripture. Of course, if Scripture is truly the word of God, then it has ultimate authority over any other, secondary authority. Yet this is not the primary emphasis of these two paragraphs. The emphasis is to state positively the basis upon which this authority “ought to be believed” and to state negatively what the basis should not be.

Why this emphasis? It was in contradistinction to the Roman Catholic view. The disagreement concerned the authority on which Scripture *ultimately* depends. Does Scripture's authority ultimately depend on the testimony of the church (Roman Catholic view) or on God through Scripture self-attesting that he is the author (Reformed view)? The Reformers argued that the testimony of the church was a good secondary evidence—in fact, an expected secondary evidence (1 Tim. 3:15)—but it was not the ultimate. Both the Reformers and Catholics agreed that if in fact the church were *the* authority upon which Scripture's authority was determined, then in a significant sense, the church would be logically more foundational than Scripture.²³ But the Reformed argued that the church is not the ultimate foundation.

23 The Roman Catholic view entails the church having an infallible “tradition” that could determine Scripture. See Council of Trent (DS 1501–5; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:79–82).

The Reformed view emphasizes that Scripture is self-attesting (synonyms include *self-authenticating*, *self-evidencing*,²⁴ and *autopistic*²⁵). How did the Reformers (and the continuing Reformed tradition) use the concept of self-attesting in relation to Scripture?²⁶ The Reformers argued that Scripture itself claims to be the word of God (e.g., Deut. 4:1; Jer. 23:29; Eph. 2:20; 2 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 1:1–2; 1 Pet. 1:10–12; 2 Pet. 1:19–21) and also evidences the divine qualities of being the word of God (e.g., in its salvation message and in the unity of its parts). That is, Scripture attests that it is the word of God. Objectively speaking, the divine marks of Scripture exist whether one agrees or not. No other evidence outside Scripture is needed to determine that God is the author of Scripture. Of course, there are secondary evidences external to the Bible (e.g., the witness of the church, archaeological finds) that dovetail with the internal evidence. To say it another way, the internal evidence from Scripture is collectively the *ultimate* objective criterion to confirm that God is the author of Scripture. Evidences outside Scripture are only *proximate* or secondary criteria.²⁷

Closely tied to the Reformed self-attesting view are the doctrines of God's sovereignty and the inspiration of Scripture. *Intimately* tied to the self-attesting view is the "testimony of the Holy Spirit."²⁸ Yes, Scripture objectively evidences itself as having God as its author. But because of

24 John Owen uses this term (*The Divine Original*, 313).

25 *Autopistic*, coming from *autopiston* or *autopistos*, might be mechanically translated as "self-faithful" or "trustworthy in itself." Calvin uses the term *autopiston*, and in context he means "self-authenticating" or "self-attesting" (*Institutes*, 1.7.5). Owing to Calvin's influence, many have also used the term.

26 For discussions of self-attesting Scripture in the Reformed tradition through the seventeenth century, see Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7–8; Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), "Clarity and Certainty or Power of the Word of God," in Zwingli and Bullinger, ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley (Westminster, 1953), 59–95, esp. 75; Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 275–358; William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying* (1592; repr. Banner of Truth, 1996), 18–21; Owen, *The Divine Original*, 297–324; Francis Turretin (1623–1687), *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., 3 vols. (P&R, 1992–1997), 1:85–94; Petrus Van Mastricht (1630–1706), *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, 7 vols. (Reformation Heritage, 2018–), 1:159–60. Also see French Confession, arts. 4–5; Belgic Confession, art. 5; Second Helvetic Confession, chap. 1.

27 See Muller for a list of "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" evidences, along with typical Scripture proof texts (*Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:269–81). Some lists of evidences do not as neatly distinguish intrinsic from extrinsic; e.g., James Ussher's fifteen evidences (*A Body of Divinity*, 6–8).

28 The terminology comes from Calvin's famous discussion in *Institutes*, 1.7.4.

sin (Rom. 1:19–20; 1 Cor. 2:14) many cannot see this; no one is neutral. Hence, the Holy Spirit, by and with Scripture but not adding any additional propositional information, is necessary to convince believers inwardly that Scripture is God’s word (John 10:27; 16:13–14; 1 Cor. 2:10–12; Heb. 10:15). Thus, by the combination of the self-attesting nature of Scripture and the testimony of the Holy Spirit, the triune God himself bears witness to and convinces individual believers and the church corporate that Scripture is his word and thus has divine authority.²⁹

The above self-attesting view is the substance of WCF 1.4–5. Paragraph 4 is effectively the broad statement, and paragraph 5 includes specific internal evidences, along with the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere, the Standards refer to the self-attesting idea in WCF 14.2, which tells of “the authority of God himself speaking therein [Scripture],” and in WLC 4, which is conceptually similar to WCF 1.5.

Note the specific language of the divines. In WCF 1.4, the “authority of the Holy Scripture” is “to be believed” because (1) it “dependeth . . . wholly upon God,” (2) God is “the author,” and (3) it is the actual “Word of God.” This is opposed to the notion that its authority is based on “any man, or church.” As J. V. Fesko well says, “Central to the Confession’s doctrine of Scripture is the belief that authority lies with the source.”³⁰ If the source is God, who *is* the ultimate authority, then his word also has ultimate authority.

Warfield has high praise for the whole chapter, but he especially praises WCF 1.5. It is “a paragraph of unsurpassed nobility of both thought and phrase.”³¹ The first half of the paragraph gives evidences that Scripture is the word of God. “Yet notwithstanding,” as the second half begins, the “full persuasion and assurance of the . . . divine authority thereof is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit.”

The first evidence given is external or proximate, the “testimony of the church.” In the context of WCF 1.4, this is clearly a proximate evidence

29 Portions of the above three paragraphs are from Robert J. Cara, “Van Til and the Study of the New Testament: Hebrews 6:13 Related to Self-Attesting Scripture,” in *Thinking God’s Thoughts After Him: Essays in the Van Til Tradition*, ed. Bradley G. Green (Wipf and Stock, forthcoming).

30 J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards* (Crossway, 2014), 77. Or as Owen says it in the opening sentence of his work, “That the whole authority of the Scripture in itself depends solely on its divine original, is confessed by all who acknowledge its authority” (*The Divine Original*, 297).

31 Warfield, *Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, 211.

(note that WLC 4 includes only internal evidences; i.e., it does not include the church). The remainder of the evidences are internal—for example, “the consent of all the parts.” Another internal evidence, yet with an external component, is the “efficacy of the doctrine”; scriptural doctrines (internal) objectively change people (external). Or as WLC 4 puts it, the Scriptures possess “light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation” (cf. WSC 89).³²

“Yet” the Holy Spirit is needed to convince someone of the divine authority despite the internal evidences that clearly and objectively reveal God as the author. Why? Human sin. This view of the necessity of the testimony of the Holy Spirit dovetails with the necessity of the Holy Spirit in the Reformed view that regeneration logically precedes faith (cf. WCF 1.6; 13.1; 14.2; WLC 72). The testimony of the Holy Spirit is “by and with the Word.” That is, the Spirit is connected to Scripture; he does not give any additional propositional truth beyond Scripture. The Spirit works in concert with the word (e.g., WCF 1.10; 10.1; 14.1; WLC 2, 43, 67, 155; WSC 24).

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.

Paragraph 6 concerns the sufficiency of Scripture, or as it is sometimes called, the perfection of Scripture.³³ Scripture is sufficient for “all things

³² John Owen also uses “light” and “power” in his discussion of Scripture’s being “self-evidencing” (*The Divine Original*, 319–25).

³³ “Sufficiency” is not used in WCF 1.6, but its cognates are in WCF 1.7 and WLC 2. WCF 7.5 and WLC 34 affirm the sufficiency of the Old Testament for Old Testament believers. The

necessary for [God's] own glory [and] man's salvation, faith and life."³⁴ The first sentence declares this sufficiency and adds an important hermeneutical consideration ("good and necessary consequence"), along with excluding "new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men" from that sufficiency. The second sentence gives two qualifications to sufficiency ("nevertheless"): One concerns the necessary work of the Holy Spirit in giving us a saving understanding, and the other asserts that Scripture does not provide all the details for "worship" and "government of the church."

We are not to add to Scripture: "unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." The anti-traditions comment is opposed to the Roman Catholic view of sacred tradition.³⁵ Trent considered both "written books [Scripture] and unwritten traditions" to be the "source of all saving truth and norms of conduct." These "traditions concerning faith and practice" are "inspired by the Holy Spirit" and due the "same sense of loyalty and reverence" as Scripture.³⁶ Given this view of sacred tradition, it is a short step to saying that Scripture is not sufficient.³⁷ Vatican II (1965) declares, "There is a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. . . . Consequently, it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything that has been revealed."³⁸ The Reformer William Whitaker well frames the question as "whether [Scripture] comprehend[s] a full and perfect body of teaching, or whether unwritten traditions are requisite to complete this necessary doctrine."³⁹

"perfection" of Scripture is asserted in WCF 1.5. Irish Articles 6 does contain "sufficiently": "The holy scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation, and are able to instruct *sufficiently* in all points of faith that we are bound to believe, and all good duties that we are bound to practice" (Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:527–28, emphasis mine).

34 Or as WLC 43 states it, sufficient for the church's "edification and salvation."

35 "New revelations of the Spirit" that add new truths were espoused by enthusiasts and some anti-nomians (cf. WCF 1.1, 10). This functionally denies the sufficiency of Scripture. So also Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (P&R, 2009), 140.

36 Council of Trent (DS 1501; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:80).

37 Further, claiming the authority to determine which traditions are sacred leads toward infallible councils and an infallible pope. Vatican I (1870) officially declared the pope infallible in certain situations. The pope is given "divine assistance" so that he has "infallibility" when he speaks "*ex cathedra*" about "a doctrine concerning faith or morals" (Vatican I, *Pastor Aeternus* [DS 3074; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:270–71]).

38 Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* (DS 4212). Also see Catechism of the Catholic Church, paras. 80–82.

39 Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 496.

WCF 1.6 begins with the often-used phrase in Reformed circles “the whole counsel of God,” which comes from Acts 20:27 (also WLC 159, cf. 43). This whole counsel “is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” The phrase “by good and necessary consequence” is a significant hermeneutical emphasis within the Reformed tradition. It supports the contention that Scripture is sufficient. The Reformed view of the sufficiency of Scripture is not simply based on the explicit statements of Scripture but also includes all the proper implications of Scripture.⁴⁰ In this sense, this phrase opposes the Roman Catholic view that required “sacred” and infallible tradition to supplement Scripture. But the confessional phrase is also aimed at Socinians and some Arminians, who denied hermeneutically that the consequences of Scripture are part of Scripture. Or as Warfield puts it, “The sense of Scripture is Scripture, and . . . men are bound by its whole sense in all its implications.”⁴¹

How is the “good and necessary consequence” view justified? As the Reformed tradition does often, it justifies this hermeneutical approach by referencing Scripture’s own hermeneutics (e.g., WLC 99). An especially clear example is when a later scriptural text interprets a previous scriptural text. A hermeneutical precedent is set, and then by implication, that particular methodology is appropriate for believers to use. This is simply the point of WCF 1.9 (Scripture interprets Scripture). For example, (1) Christ argues in Matthew 22:31–32 by necessary consequence that Exodus 3:6 (“I am . . . the God of Abraham”) proves the resurrection; and (2) any argument in the New Testament that concludes that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament must be by necessary consequence (e.g., Acts 18:28; Heb. 7:21–22).⁴²

40 See Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:37–43. For modern explanations, see C. J. Williams, “Good and Necessary Consequence in the Westminster Confession,” in *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne R. Spear*, ed. Anthony T. Selvaggio (P&R, 2007), 171–90; Ryan M. McGraw, *By Good and Necessary Consequence*, Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology (Reformation Heritage, 2012).

41 Warfield, *Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, 226.

42 The assembly was asked by the House of Commons to justify that scriptural proofs could include ones that were by necessary consequence. The assembly used four scriptures to justify this: Matt. 22:31–32 with Ex. 3:6; John 10:30–38 with Ps. 82:6; Acts 13:34 with Ps. 2:7 and Isa. 55:3; and Heb. 1:6 with Ps. 97:7//Deut. 32:43. See session 640, Friday, May 15, 1646 (Van Dixhoorn, ed., *MPWA* 4:128).

Before the Westminster Standards were written, the expression “necessary consequence” abounded in Reformed writings.⁴³ But the exact expression “good and necessary consequence” was somewhat difficult to find. What does “good” add to this phrase? Are not all necessary consequences good by definition if they come from Scripture?

Most likely the answer comes from Gillespie’s *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions*. Gillespie, who was an influential member of the assembly, wrote a chapter on “necessary consequences,” which the “reformed churches hold against the Arians, Antitrinitarians, Socinians, [and] Papists.”⁴⁴ The chapter has a short section where Gillespie distinguishes “necessary” from “good” consequences. To explain this distinction, he first notes that Thomas Aquinas made a distinction between two types of reasonings for astronomy and then drew an implication for a Trinity discussion (*Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 32, art. 1, obj. 2).⁴⁵ For Thomas, one type of reasoning is used as a sufficient proof of a principle (e.g., that planets move with uniform velocity). The other is used to confirm the principle in question by showing congruity with it (the theory of epicycles, which depends on uniform velocity). This second type of reasoning could not be an absolute proof of the original principle but, once given the principle, confirms it further and adds additional insights. Gillespie takes these two types of reasonings and equates them to two types of consequences: (1) “necessary, strong, and certain” and (2) “good to prove a suitableness or agreeableness of this or that to Scripture, though another thing may be also proved to be agreeable unto the same Scripture in the same or another place.”⁴⁶ For the divines, “necessary” consequences are those more closely related to the explicit statements of a scriptural text, and “good” consequences are more peripheral, but both are part of Scripture.

Two qualifications follow. The first is that for Scripture to be truly sufficient in an individual’s life, “the inward illumination of the Spirit of God”

43 With language close to the Westminster Standards, the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession 1.6 reads “is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture.” That is, the “good and necessary consequence” phrase of WCF 1.6 is slightly altered.

44 George Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Edinburgh, 1649). For chap. 20, see 238–45, esp. 240.

45 Elsewhere Thomas asserts that the “sense of Scripture” includes both those things found “explicitly and implicitly” (*Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 36, art. 2, obj. 1).

46 Gillespie, *Treatise of Miscellany Questions*, 239–40, emphasis mine.

is “necessary for the *saving* understanding of such things revealed in the word.” Scripture objectively and sufficiently reveals God’s plan of salvation, but because of human sin, to truly believe in a saving way requires the Holy Spirit. Here the divines reference John 6:45 and 1 Corinthians 2:9–12, two texts that clearly connect Scripture to the Holy Spirit for a saving understanding.

The second qualification refers to the level of detail to which sufficiency extends. Scripture is sufficient for “the worship of God, and the government of the church.”⁴⁷ However, not all the details (“circumstances”) are included in Scripture—for example, the time when a corporate church service should begin or the number of ruling elders required at a local church.

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.

Paragraph 7 concerns what is commonly called the “perspicuity” or “clarity” of Scripture on things the confession describes as “so clearly propounded.” This well-balanced statement admits that not all Scripture is clear, but the main points required for salvation are sufficiently clear even for one “unlearned.”⁴⁸

Trent stated that no one may interpret Scripture “contrary to the meaning that Holy Mother the Church has held and holds.”⁴⁹ Catholic theologians at the time further concluded that the Catholic magisterium and unwritten traditions were needed for anyone to understand Scripture because the Bible

47 This is commonly termed the “regulative principle.” God’s word regulates, prescribes the elements of worship and the broad outlines of church government. See WCF 20.2; 21.1; 31.1–2; WLC 108.

48 Whitaker’s two-sentence summary of the issue matches very well WCF 1.7 (*Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 364). Irish Articles 5 has similar wording, including “Although there be some hard thing in Scripture . . . all things necessary to be known unto everlasting salvation are clearly delivered therein” and “learned and unlearned” (Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:527).

49 Council of Trent (DS 1507; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:83).

is not clear enough on its own.⁵⁰ In addition, it was considered dangerous for laymen to read Scripture for themselves.⁵¹

In asserting perspicuity, the divines give several qualifications. First, all Scripture is not equally clear (“alike plain in themselves”). In fact, 2 Peter 3:16 states this explicitly. Peter says about Paul’s letters, “There are some things in them that are hard to understand.” Second, some passages are clearer to some readers than to others because of differing interpretative abilities (“not . . . alike clear unto all”). Third, the perspicuity extends only to doctrines and practices “necessary . . . for salvation,” and for a “sufficient” but not exhaustive understanding of them. Fourth, perspicuous doctrines and practices are based on all Scripture combined (“propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other”).

Positively, both the “learned” and the “unlearned” may understand the things necessary for salvation. One does not have to have academic theological training in a Protestant school or be part of the Roman Catholic magisterium to understand “sufficient[ly]” Scripture’s main emphases. Perspicuity extends even to the “unlearned” as they learn by “due use of the ordinary means.” These ordinary means include the normal ability to read (or hear) and comprehend texts, along with the assumption that one attends worship services with their teaching functions (cf. WCF 31.3).

In their rebuttals to Roman Catholic theologians who denied perspicuity, many Reformers pointed out that God is light and his word is light. Light results in clarity! Note that the only scriptural references the divines give here are Psalm 119:105, 130, both of which verses describe God’s word with a “light” metaphor. Other rebuttal arguments include the commands to search the Scriptures (e.g., John 5:39; Acts 17:11) and the fact that many scriptures are explicitly addressed to all types of people (e.g., Deut. 30:11; Matt. 5:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; Col. 4:16; 2 Pet. 1:1).

The perspicuity of Scripture is a wonderful truth. It encourages individual Christians to read their Bibles at home. While all Christians will not equally understand everything in the Bible, the main emphases are accessible by

50 For a modern defense of the Roman Catholic view, see Casey J. Chalk, *The Obscurity of Scripture: Disputing Sola Scriptura and the Protestant Notion of Biblical Perspicuity* (Emmaus Road, 2023).

51 Vatican II (1965), however, encourages layman to read the Scriptures with qualifications (*Dei Verbum* [DS 4229, 4232]).

“due use of the ordinary means.” Perspicuity is also a truth that warns. One cannot use a lack of clarity as an excuse for not reading the Bible.

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 authentic; 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.

WCF 1.8 is another wonderfully balanced paragraph. The original-language texts of Scripture are *the* inspired word and the absolute final authority. Nonetheless, translations of Scripture are very useful.

Lurking in the background again is the Council of Trent: The “ancient Vulgate version . . . is to be regarded as authentic in public readings, disputations, sermons, and expositions.”⁵² For Roman Catholicism, the Vulgate (Latin translation of the Bible) is the authentic scriptural text. Whitaker acknowledges that Roman Catholics do not “condemn” the Hebrew and Greek originals, but their claiming that the Vulgate is the authentic text is a significant error in that it is “very generally and miserably corrupt, is false and not authentic.”⁵³

This paragraph begins with a positive affirmation that the original Hebrew (Old Testament) and original Greek (New Testament) texts are the writings “immediately inspired by God.” Here “immediately” means without

52 Council of Trent (DS 1506; cf. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:82). Similarly, Vatican I says, “These books of the Old and New Testaments are to be received as sacred and canonical . . . and are contained in the ancient Latin edition of the Vulgate . . . having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (*Dei Filius* [DS 3006; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:241–42]).

53 Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 111.

an intervening instrument; that is, God directly inspired the human authors of Scripture. Owing to this immediate inspiration, the Hebrew and Greek texts are “authentic,” the authentic words of God.⁵⁴ Given this, “in all controversies of religion,” the church must “finally . . . appeal” to these original-language texts, as opposed to translations.

A technical point warrants mention here. The Old Testament is predominantly written in Hebrew, but a few portions are in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Jer. 10:11; Dan. 2:4–7:18). Aramaic is linguistically close to Hebrew. The divines were well aware of the Aramaic Old Testament texts and the linguistic similarities.⁵⁵ Thus, “Old Testament in Hebrew” is intended to include what we today term Hebrew and Aramaic.

The original Hebrew and Greek texts directly inspired by God are commonly called the *autographa*. A distinction should be made between the actual parchment that, for example, Paul wrote on when he penned Romans and the text itself on that parchment. The autographic text itself, not the parchment, has been “by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages.” Compared with all other ancient books, the number of extant copied manuscripts of the Scriptures is overwhelming. The divines also realize that the texts of Scripture in the many copied manuscripts do not always agree exactly. So in what sense is the text “kept pure”? For the vast majority of instances where the copied manuscripts differ, it is clear which readings are the *autographa*. In a few instances, it is not clear. Nevertheless, the manuscripts, when considered together, do contain the entire autographic text. To say it another way, we have the entire autographic text, though we have, if you will, 100.5 percent of it; in a few instances we are not sure which words among existing options are original. Yet, in all texts where there is uncertainty, no doctrine or practice depends on them.

Why should translations into the “vulgar [common] language” be made when the original-language texts are authentic? Because the “people of God” who do not know the original languages “are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them.” Reading Scripture will enhance their

⁵⁴ “Authentic” is used by Trent to refer to the Vulgate, which probably explains its use here by the divines.

⁵⁵ E.g., see the Geneva Bible (1560) notes at Jer. 10:11 (*The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* [Hendrickson, 2007], fol. 310); and *Annotations*, on Jer. 10:11: “This verse is conceived not in pure Hebrew, but in the Syrian dialect . . . [also] spoken among the Chaldeans . . . see Dan. 2:4 [and] Ezra. 4:7.”

“worship” and Christian “hope.” This is consistent with and assumes the perspicuity emphasis of WCF 1.7.

These translations are to be made from the original-language texts (WLC 156). Although they are translations, “the Word of God dwell[s] plentifully” in them. That is, a translation is the word of God as it is properly derived from the original word of God. All major English translations are, overwhelmingly, properly derivative.

As the Protestant tradition has long held, missionary activity includes preparing translations of the Scriptures where none exist. “[The Scriptures] are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come.” When written in the 1640s, this point encouraged missionary endeavors. Also, it was directed against the Roman Catholic practice of downplaying translations, although that has since changed, as is explicitly confirmed by Vatican II.⁵⁶

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.

This paragraph concerns a major hermeneutical methodology and presupposes several previously discussed points. If God is the author of all Scripture (WCF 1.2), and nothing is to be considered more authoritative than Scripture (1.4–5, 8), then the “infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.” If some document or human could infallibly help us interpret Scripture, then that interpreter would logically be more foundational than Scripture. The Reformed tradition is here agreeing with many throughout church history who also advocated this principle, most famously Augustine (354–430).⁵⁷ The divines further note that this “rule” is especially useful for a less clear scriptural text when “other places [in Scripture] . . . speak more clearly.”

One key to this paragraph is the word “infallible.” If one section of Scripture is interpreted correctly, then it is an *infallible* aid to the interpretation

⁵⁶ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* (DS 4229).

⁵⁷ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.6; 3.26 (NPNF¹ 2:537, 566).

of another section. The divines are not denying that commentaries or creeds or sermons or historical sources are aids to interpretation. But these are only *fallible* aids. In fact, WCF 31.3 states that although creeds and councils have erred, they are “to be used as a help” for “faith, or practice”—that is, they are fallible aids. This infallible-fallible distinction is directly related to the Reformed doctrine of *sola Scriptura*—only Scripture is infallible. But this does not mean there are no other, fallible aids, such as the Westminster Standards!

WCF 1.9 makes another hermeneutical point about meaning. An individual scriptural text has only “one” sense, but this is a “full sense.”⁵⁸ Behind this point is concern over the medieval practice of the fourfold senses (meanings) of each text (*quadriga*). The four senses were the literal and three “spiritual” ones: allegorical (typology, things to be believed), tropological (moral “manner,” things to be done), and analogical (“leading,” things to be hoped for in the future).⁵⁹ At its worst, the *quadriga* mechanically looks for these four meanings in every passage, which functionally produces four unrelated meanings.⁶⁰ At its best, the three “spiritual” senses were connected to the literal and not mechanically applied to every passage.⁶¹ The divines realize that a scriptural text often does have an expanded meaning beyond the surface level. Are sacrificial lambs in the Old Testament merely lambs, or do they also teach us about sin, substitution, and ultimately Jesus Christ? Does “you shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13), which on the surface refers to physical killing, also teach us not to be angry (Matt. 5:21–22; cf. WLC 99)? Are not historical stories written, at least partially, as examples for later readers (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:1–13)? What the Reformed objected to were senses *unrelated* to the text and to each other. Whitaker, after discussing the *quadriga*, “concede[s]” that there are expanded senses in Scripture but prefers to say that these senses “are various collections from one sense, or

58 The term “literal sense” is not included in the Standards, although the minutes record that there was debate on whether to include it (session 471, Monday, July 17, 1645 [Van Dixhoorn, ed., MPWA 3:636]).

59 For good, brief discussion of the *quadriga*, see Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 301–3.

60 Turretin viewed the Roman Catholic practice as “many diverse and non-subordinated senses of the same passage” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:150).

61 E.g., Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, q. 1, art. 10. Similarly, Catechism of the Catholic Church, paras. 115–17.

various applications and accommodations of that one meaning.”⁶² Or, as the divines say it, one *full* sense. We could say that the meaning of a text is like a circle with central and peripheral points, all organically connected.

This one *full* sense is certainly consistent with other hermeneutical comments in the Westminster Standards. For example, consider the concept of “good and necessary consequence” (WCF 1.6); “rules” for the “right understanding of the Ten Commandments” (WLC 99); typological “promises, types, and sacrifices” of Christ (WCF 8.6; cf. 7.5; WLC 34); the various “use[s]” of the moral law (WLC 95; cf. WCF 19.6); and the “divers instructions of [New Testament] moral duties” from Old Testament ceremonial laws (WCF 19.3; cf. 1 Cor. 5:7); also the fact that “names and effects” of signs and things signified in sacraments are sometimes “attributed to the other” (WCF 27.2; cf. 29.5), and that God’s actions are an “example” for our actions (i.e., communicable attributes and actions) (WLC 120).

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.

Paragraph 10 concisely restates several concepts already found in WCF 1. In doing so, it counters Trent, enthusiasts, and probably Socinians. Trent states that “it belongs to [Holy Mother Church] to *judge* the true sense and interpretation of Scripture.”⁶³ Enthusiasts (“private spirits”) dismiss using the Scriptures and rely only on the Spirit.⁶⁴ Socinians (likely implicated in “doctrines of men”) tend to elevate reason as the final judge.

⁶² Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 404.

⁶³ Council of Trent (DS 1507; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:83, emphasis mine). Similarly, Vatican I, *Dei Filius* (DS 3007; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:242).

⁶⁴ Whitaker quotes the “libertine” Hosius Polonus: “We will dismiss the scriptures, and rather listen to God speaking to us, than return to those beggarly elements. One is not required to be learned in the law and scriptures, but to be taught of God. Vain is the labour which is expended upon scripture: for the scripture is a creature and a beggarly sort of element” (*Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 36). Van Mastricht comments, “The enthusiasts . . . make Scripture’s authority depend on the dictates of one’s private Spirit” (*Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 1:159). Or could “private spirits” refer more specifically to private *evil* spirits, as in 1 John 4:1–3 and 6? Or, as Byron Curtis more recently has argued, are private spirits simply “personal revelations” that

To put it simply, “the supreme judge” is “the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”⁶⁵ Since this is true, all human viewpoints are to be “examined” by this Judge (Matt. 22:29; 2 Cor. 10:5).⁶⁶ And if this Judge declares a decision (“sentence”), we may confidently “rest” in it.

Interestingly, the “decrees of councils,” while including Trent, functionally also include the Westminster Standards themselves. Further, the divines admit that “all synods or councils . . . may err; and many have erred” (WCF 31.3). Thus, the divines readily acknowledge that all of their own statements in the Standards “are to be examined” by “the supreme judge.”

In sum, as noted above, Warfield had high praise for chapter 1 of the confession, and I agree. But, of course, Holy Scripture itself deserves even more praise. May we all reflect on these great statements from Scripture: “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path. (Ps. 119:105)

are not necessarily wrong (“‘Private Spirits’ in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* §1.10 and in Catholic-Protestant Debate [1588–1652],” *Westminster Theological Journal* 58, no. 2 [1996]: 257–66, esp. 260)? See the rebuttal to Curtis with the conclusion that “private spirits” refers to enthusiasts (Garnet H. Milne, “‘Private Spirits’ in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and in Protestant-Catholic Debates: A Response to Byron Curtis,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 61, no. 1 [1999]: 101–10). My view is that “private spirits” in WCF 1.10 refers to enthusiasts and is related to “those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased” (WCF 1.1), and “nothing at any time is to be added . . . by new revelations of the Spirit” (WCF 1.6).

⁶⁵ Here again in the Westminster Standards, word and Spirit are connected. See references at WCF 1.5.

⁶⁶ The French Confession, art. 5, has somewhat similar language, “All things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to [the Holy Scriptures]” (Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:362).