

“The Only Way of Man’s Salvation”: Scripture in the Westminster Confession

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It was the best of confessions, it was the worst of confessions; it was the embodiment of belief, it was the embodiment of sterile dogmatism; it was framed in a season of doctrinal light, it was produced in a season of spiritual darkness; it was our spring of theological hope, it was our winter of scholastic despair—and to this day, some of its noisiest authorities insist on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. Very few of the major Reformed confessions can claim such a reputation: the *Westminster Confession* has surely been more praised, maligned, emphasized, and ignored than any other of our confessional documents—with the sole exceptions of the other Westminster Standards, notably the *Larger Catechism*. Scottish and American Presbyterianism certainly have had a love-hate relationship with the document, viewing it by turns with admiration¹ and profound distaste.² Particularly with regard to its doctrine of Scripture, the confession has been associated with the heritage of Reformed orthodoxy and the Princeton school³—and it has been taken up virtually as a banner by those who have a dislike for scholastic orthodoxy and who would identify themselves as opponents of the old Princeton School.⁴

¹Thus, e.g., Edward D. Morris, *Theology of the Westminster Symbols: A Commentary Historical, Doctrinal, Practical on the Confession of Faith and Catechisms and the Related Formularies of the Presbyterian Churches* (Columbus, OH: Champlin Press, 1911), Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Confession and its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981); and John H. Leith, *Assembly At Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973).

²E.g., Holmes Rolston III, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond: John Knox, 1972); idem, “Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession,” in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 23 (1970), pp. 129-156; James B. Torrance, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” in *The Westminster Confession*, ed. Alisdair Heron (1982), pp. 40-53; and idem, “Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background or Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland,” in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 23 (1970), pp. 51-76.

³E.g., John H. Gerstner, “The Church’s Doctrine of Biblical Inspiration,” in *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, ed. J. M. Boice (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 23-58; idem, “The View of the Bible held by the Church: Calvin and the Westminster Divines,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 385-410; John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: a Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), pp. 101-18; W. Robert Godfrey, “Biblical Authority in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Question of Transition,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 225-243; and note also Stanley N. Gundry, “John Owen on Authority and Scripture,” in *Inerrancy and the Church*, ed. John D. Hannah (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), pp. 189-221.

⁴Jack B. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); idem, “The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority,” in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), pp. 17-46; idem, “The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible in the Reformed Tradition,” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 51-65; also Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible:*

At very least, these debates indicate that, the confession remains highly significant to contemporary discussion of the Reformed faith and that it must be explained or even explained away in order for various contemporary theological programs to proceed in peace. This consideration leads, in turn, to the need to understand the confession in its proper context. It ought also to be reasonably clear that neither Old Princeton, nor twentieth-century neo-orthodoxy, nor the modern Dutch Reformed theology of a G. C. Berkouwer provide that context any more than they provide the context for understanding the theology of Calvin and other Reformers. Such understanding must arise out of the documents themselves as set into their own historical context—which, in the case of the *Westminster Confession*, is the heritage of the Reformation as presented through the interpretive glass of the English and Scots Reformed theology of the mid-seventeenth century,⁵ which was itself part of the larger phenomenon that has been called “international Calvinism.”⁶

1. THE ASSEMBLY AND THE CONFESSION

In July 1643, the Westminster Assembly met for the first time.⁷ Barely a month later, Parliament went to war with the King—and the war, as much as the work of the Assembly, would determine the nature of religion in England. The Assembly itself consisted in an eminent body of British theologians and clergy together with a set of Parliamentary delegates: originally there were ten delegates from the House of Lords, twenty from the Commons, and one hundred and twenty one divines. Richard Baxter would later declare that “as far as I am able to judge by the information of all history of that kind, and by any other evidences left us, the Christian world, since the days of the apostles, had never a synod of more excellent divines than this and the synod of Dort.”⁸ If none of the members of the Westminster Assembly are remembered today, several—William Twisse (1575-1646), John Lightfoot (1602-75), and Thomas Gataker (1574-1654)—were renowned in their own time.

The first order of business at the Westminster Assembly was a revision of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England, specifically for the sake of preventing either an Arminian or a catholicizing reading. This work moved forward and by October of 1643, the Assembly had in hand a revised text of the first fifteen of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. By October, however, the war between king and Parliament had become difficult and the Parliament concluded an alliance with the Scots. The Solemn League and Covenant concluded between Parliament and the Scots radically

an Historical Approach (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979).

⁵On this broader context, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (2 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987-93).

⁶Thus, William Robert Godfrey, “Tensions within International Calvinism’ the Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619” (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1974); and Menna Prestwich (ed.), *International Calvinism, 1541-1715* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁷In addition to Warfield’s *Westminster Assembly and its Work*, the major studies and sources of the work of the Assembly remain William H. Hetherington, *The History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Third edition, Edinburgh, 1856); Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (London, 1873); Alexander F. Mitchell and John Struthers (eds.), *The Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1874).

⁸William Orme, *The Life and Times of Richard Baxter: with a Critical Examination of His Writings* (2 vols. London: James Duncan, 1830), I, p. 86.

altered the work of the Assembly and ultimately set aside the revision of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. Inasmuch as the solemn League and covenant called for the closest “conjunction and uniformity” between the churches in Scotland and England, the Assembly now had to take up the task of a full religious reformation, relating to worship, discipline, and church government as well as doctrine. The Assembly spent the ten months following the Solemn League and Covenant preparing a directory of worship to replace the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Given the fact that the Scots had their own Reformation era confession and were not inclined to accept a revision of the English Articles, and given the increasing sentiment that a full reformation was called for, the Assembly moved toward composing a totally new document. Indeed, the Scots more than the English, had recognized, at the point of signing the Solemn League, that none of their older confessional documents were suitable to the purpose of union and that a new confession would be necessary.⁹ On August 20, 1644 the Assembly returned to the work of drafting a confession and established “a Committee to join with the Commissioners of the Church of Scotland to prepare matter for a joint Confession of Faith.” The committee consisted of William Gouge, Thomas Gataker, John Arrowsmith, Thomas Temple, Jeremiah Burroughs, Cornelius Burges, Richard Vines, Thomas Goodwin, and Joshua Hoyle. On September 4, this initial committee reported to the Assembly and, on the specific request of the chair, Thomas Temple, asked that its number be augmented by the addition of Herbert Palmer, Matthew Newcomen, Charles Herle, Edward Reynolds, Thomas Wilson, Anthony Tuckney, Brocket (Peter) Smith, Thomas Young, John Ley, and Obadiah Sedgwick. The Assembly acceded to the additions.¹⁰

In April 1645, after much delay on the part of the Assembly, the House of Commons formally instructed the Assembly to proceed with its work on the confession. On April 21, a committee, presumably not the committee organized to draft the new Confession of Faith, reported on the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, recommending a review of the document. In response, the Assembly ordered this committee to determine which, if any, of the articles should be considered “useful ... till a Confession of Faith can be drawn up by this Assembly.”¹¹ The committee on the Articles was to meet that day, and the committee on the new confession was called to meet on the following Wednesday—but it was only on May 12 that a somewhat reconstituted committee was finally named.¹² A first draft of the chapter on Scripture was written by the committee and presented for discussion and debate on July 7. Debate continued through the eighteenth of July. At that time, three subcommittees were formed to deal with specific doctrinal topics.¹³ After a year of work, on

⁹See Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, pp. 54-5, citing letters of the Scots commissioner, Robert Baillie.

¹⁰Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, p. lxxxvii; Lightfoot, *Works*, XIII, p. 305; for lives of the divines, see: James Reid, *Memoirs of the Lives and Writings of those Eminent Divines who Convened in the Famous Assembly at Westminster, in the Seventeenth Century* (2 vols. Paisley: Stephen and Andrew Young, 1811-15; reprint Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982); biographies of Arrowsmith, Temple, Gataker, Harris, Herle, Hoyle, and Whitaker are also found in Benjamin Brooke, *The Lives of the Puritans: Containing a Biographical Account of those Divines who Distinguished Themselves in the Cause of Religious Liberty from the Reformation under Queen Elizabeth, to the Act of Uniformity, in 1662*, (3 vols. London: James black, 1813; reprint Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994).

¹¹Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, p. 83.

¹²Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, p. 91.

¹³Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, p. 114.

25 September 1646, the first nineteen chapters of the confession were delivered to the House of Commons for consideration, with the remaining fifteen chapters following on 26 November. Parliament required that each section of the confession be illustrated with proof-texts—a labor that took the committee until April 1647. After another year of close consideration of the text, the confession was adopted for England by Parliament in June, 1648. The Scottish Parliament ratified the confession in 1649.

We also have clear and precise documentation concerning the drafting of the various major sections of the Confession. A smaller sub-committee was named on May 12, 1645 in order to expedite the drafting of individual chapters of the confession: it was comprised of Thomas Temple, Joshua Hoyle, Thomas Gataker, Robert Harris, Cornelius Burgess, Edward Reynolds, and Charles Herle.¹⁴ In response to the Assembly's request of 4 July that "the sub-committee for the Confession of Faith ... make report to the Assembly on Monday morning of what is in their hands concerning ... the Scriptures," the first chapter of the confession, "Of the Holy Scripture," was presented to the Assembly by Dr. Thomas Temple on Monday, 7 July 1645.¹⁵ Debate on the text of the chapter ran from July 7 through July 18 of 1645.¹⁶

The minutes of the Assembly offer clear references to the progress of debate on the confession, but only seldom record the actual comments and amendments made by members of the Assembly. On July 8, for example, Edward Reynolds, Charles Herle, and Matthew Newcomen were appointed "to take care of the wording of the Confession of Faith, as it is voted in the assembly ... and [after conferring with the Scots Commissioners] to report to the assembly when they think fit there should be any alteration in the words."¹⁷ Debate continued on July 11 and 14 with specific reference to "the necessity of inward illumination for understanding" Scripture. On July 15, the Assembly again debated the clause and inserted the word "saving"—yielding the statement that "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."¹⁸ The issue addressed here was that the text of Scripture is plain enough in all doctrines necessary to salvation when rightly read and interpreted and that the illumination of the Spirit adds no new revelation to that which is objectively given in the written Word, but that spiritual illumination is necessary for the salvific appropriation of the doctrines learned from the written Word by ordinary means. The absence of comment in the minutes of the Assembly does not, however, indicate absence of discussion. The minutes are notoriously sparse, and as the notes and recollections of members like Gillespie and Lightfoot frequently indicate, there was often extensive discussion, most of which went unrecorded by the official scribes, of even slight variations and differences in phrasing.¹⁹ Unfortunately, Lightfoot's

¹⁴Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, p. 91.

¹⁵Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, pp. 109-10.

¹⁶Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, p. pp. 110, 115; cf. Mitchell, *History*, pp. 357-8 and Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, pp. 87-91, 93 on the problem of identifying the committees.

¹⁷Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, p. 110.

¹⁸Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, pp. 111, 113; cf. *Westminster Confession*, I.vi.

¹⁹See George Gillespie, *Notes of Debates and Proceedings of the assembly of divines and other Commissioners at Westminster*, ed. David Meek from unpublished manuscripts, in *The Works of Mr. George Gillespie* (2 vols. Edinburgh: Ogle, Oliver, and Boyd, 1846), vol. II, separate pagination; John Lightfoot, *Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines*, in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D. D. Master of Catharine Hall*,

journal concludes on 31 December 1644 and Gillespie's notes terminate with 3 January 1645. Neither offers information concerning the actual conduct of the debates on the confession. There are, however, several treatises and sermons by Gillespie written with the Assembly and its teachings in view, one of which does relate directly to the chapter of the confession on Scripture.²⁰"

In the two and a half years intervening between July 1645 and January 1647,²¹ moreover, the text had been refined and edited by review committee. The review committee, as constituted on 8 December 1645, consisted in Anthony Tuckney, Edward Reynolds, Matthew Newcomen, Jeremiah Whitaker, with the addition, on June 17, 1646, of John Arrowsmith.²² A reference to further debate on Scripture, followed by the initial report on chapter two of the confession, is found in the minute for July 18 and on the following day, the Assembly instructed the committee on review (presumably Tuckney, Reynolds, Newcomen, Whitaker, and Arrowsmith) to take final responsibility for the "wording and methodizing of the Confession of Faith."²³ Subsequent references to debate on the confession do not mention Scripture, but indicate discussion of other topics.²⁴ Debate resumed on January 7, 1647 with reference to the proof-texts supplied by the committee and continued through January 15.

2. THE THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE CONFESSION AND CATECHISMS

The identity of the framers of the chapter on Scripture and the content of their writings are certainly significant to the understanding of the document--as is the Reformed theological tradition in which they were trained. The *Westminster Confession* itself, though not written in a scholastic style and not properly a theological system, could not have been written apart from the intellectual background of Protestant orthodoxy and scholasticism, with its strong components of logic,

Cambridge, ed. John Rogers Pitman (13 vols. London: J. F. Dove, 1825), vol. 13, pp. 1-344.

²⁰George Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions*, ch. 20: "That necessary consequences from the written Word of God do sufficiently and strongly prove the consequent or conclusion, if theoretical, to be a certain divine truth which ought to be believed, and, if practical, to be a necessary duty which we are obliged unto, *jure divino*," in Works, II, pp. 100-3. William Hethrington, in his memoir of Gillespie (*Works*, I, xxxiv) believed that several of the chapters of Gillespie's *Miscellany Questions*, including this particular one, were written out as personal preparation for debate in the Assembly. As evidence for this thesis, Hethrington notes not only the relationship between several sections of the *Miscellany Questions* and the topics of the confession but also the use of other chapters of the document, in edited form, in the treatise on church government, *Aaron's Rod*, completed in 1646 and dedicated to the Assembly as a capstone to the Erastian controversy--which fixes the date of the writing of some of the questions before the conclusion of the Assembly. Hethrington does not, however, take up the point in his *History* (cf. pp. 281-85), and inasmuch as the text of Gillespie's questions do not indicate either by comment or by way of form that they arose in relation to debates on the floor of the Assembly, the questions related to the topics of the confession offer, at best, collateral testimony to the nature of the issues there addressed--and not direct commentary on the text of the confession (cf. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, pp. 333-39).

²¹Note that, in the seventeenth century, the English calendar still began its year on Lady Day, March 25--with the result that January 1645 fell six months *after* July 1645 (the preceding January being January 1644), yielding two and a half years between July 1645 and January 1647.

²²Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, pp. 168, 245.

²³Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, p. 245.

²⁴Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes*, pp. 114-15.

dialectic and Aristotelian causality. The framers of the confession, most of whom had been educated at Cambridge, had followed a fairly typical late scholastic curriculum,²⁵ and had, among other works, read with care Calvin's *Institutes*, which remained standard in theology at Cambridge.²⁶ They certainly, also, had read or examined theological works of their own English predecessors and contemporaries, various medieval scholastics, and representative continental theologians of the era. There was, in fact, a consistent and fruitful intellectual commerce between England and the continent throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: theologians like Perkins, William Whitaker, Ames, Weemes, Gataker, Twisse, and Owen read widely in the works of continental theologians and were, themselves, highly regarded on the continent, especially by the Dutch and Swiss Reformed. Some of this theological "reading list" of mid-seventeenth-century English theologians can be identified in the numerous citations offered in the writings of Edward Leigh, who was a member of Parliament at the time of the Westminster Assembly.²⁷

The confession reflects, moreover, the shape of the Reformed orthodox theological system, built upon the two *principia* of Scripture and the triune God, lacking only the prior *locus*, the prolegomenon to theology, in which the basic definition of the subject was set forth. The absence of this first *locus* is easily explained by the fact that this is a confession and not a system properly so-called. The subjects included in the first two chapters of the confession compare almost exactly with the subjects of the *loci de scriptura* and *de deo* of the scholastic systems. In short, the *Westminster Confession* is a product of the age of scholastic orthodoxy which draws both in form and in content upon the systematic development of Reformed orthodoxy—but it is also a product which respects the difference in *genre* between system and confession.²⁸ The confession intentionally offers no more detail than its authors thought necessary for a basic definition of Reformed doctrine—and many topics found in the theological systems of the day are entirely omitted from consideration.

The Westminster standards also well illustrate the path of doctrinal exposition taken by Protestant scholasticism, and stand in relation to the confessions of the preceding century much as the theological systems of the era of orthodoxy stand to the more systematic efforts of the Reformers. The two catechisms of the Assembly follow a logical and systematic form based on earlier documents of the scholastic era, notably Ussher's *A Body of Divinity* and, according to

²⁵See William T. Costello, *The Scholastic Curriculum at Early Seventeenth-Century Cambridge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

²⁶See Charles D. Cremins, *The Reception of Calvinistic Thought in England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

²⁷See Edward Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity* (London, 1646) and idem, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity* (London, 1662).

²⁸Contra Jack B. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); and Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, both of which attempt to free the confession from "scholastic" influences by dating the beginnings of Reformed scholasticism in England after the time of the confession and by arguing a "Platonic" and therefore non-scholastic philosophy underlying the confession. See the blistering but nonetheless substantive critique in Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: a Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*; and note the alternative explanation of the issue in Richard A. Muller, *Scholasticism and Orthodoxy in the Reformed Tradition: An Attempt at Definition* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1995); also note Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, I, pp. 13-40, 88-97, 231-67; II, 69-145.

some, Wollebius' *Compendium*, which had gone through a series of Latin editions around the time of the Assembly and which was translated into English shortly afterward.²⁹ As for the confession, its reliance on the work of Ussher, its intellectual and spiritual kinship to the theological works of various members of the Assembly,³⁰ and its subsequent elaboration into a large-scale scholastic system, probably by David Dickson, all point to its place at the center of the development of an English Reformed version of Protestant scholastic theology.³¹

The chapter on Scripture presents a cohesive statement of virtually all points of the doctrine of Scripture found in the Reformed dogmatics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but developed in a confessional rather than in a fully dogmatic or scholastic form. Leith notes that this first chapter—like all that follow—is remarkably concise and entirely devoid of unnecessary or tendentious argument: we encounter here a simple statement of the contents of the canon of Scripture and no debate on problems of authorship; we read a strong statement of the inspiration and authority of Scripture but no attempt to formulate a particular theory of inspiration.³² As with the *Irish Articles*, Westminster marks a formal development of the Reformed doctrine of Scripture without any abandonment of the basic premises of early Reformed doctrine.

Although written with a retrospective glance at the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, most clearly echoes the order and contents of the *Irish Articles*. As Warfield long ago pointed out, the confession so fully stands in the line of the orthodox Reformed theology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whether that of the English Puritans or that of the continental writers that “there is scarcely a leading divine of the first three quarters of a century of Reformed theology, who has written at large on the Scriptures, from whom statements may not be drawn so as to make them appear to be

²⁹Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae* (London, 1642, 47, 48, 54, 55, 57, 61); translated by Alexander Ross as *the Abridgement of Christian Divinity* (London, 1650, 56, 60); and cf. the comments of Schaff, *Creeeds*, I, p. 756.

³⁰E.g., John Arrowsmith, *Armillæ Catechetica; A Chain of Principles: Or, an Orderly Concatenation of Theological Aphorisms and Exercitations* (Cambridge, 1659); William Gouge, *A Short Catechisme* (London, 1615); Thomas Gataker, *A Short Catechism* (London, 1624); idem, *Shadowes without Substance, or Pretended New Lights ... Divers Points of Faith and Passages of Scripture ... Vindicated and Explained* (London, 1646); William Twisse, *A Brief Catechetical Exposition* (London, 1645); and idem, *The Scriptures Sufficiency* (London, 1656); and note the *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...* (London, 1645), compiled by John Ley (the Pentateuch and the four Gospels), William Gouge (I Kings through Esther), Merle Casaubon (Psalms), Francis Taylor (Proverbs), Edward Reynolds (Ecclesiastes), Smallwood (Song of Solomon), Thomas Gataker (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Lamentations), Pemberton (Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets, in the first edition), Richardson (Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets, in the second edition), Daniel Featley (the Pauline Epistles), John Downname, and J. Reading; Ley, Gouge, Taylor, Reynolds, Gataker, and Featley were members of the Westminster Assembly. The commentary has been referred to as the “Westminster Annotations” or the “Assembly’s Annotations” not only because of the number of Westminster divines who participated in its compilation but also because the commentary was, in part, a response to the so-called *Dutch Annotations*, translated by Theodore Haak. A set of additional annotations, augmenting the second enlarged edition of 1651, was published under the auspices of Parliament in 1658.

³¹David Dickson, *The Summe of Saving Knowledge* (Edinburgh, 1671); and idem, *Truth’s Victory Over Error* (Edinburgh, 1684).

³²Cf. John H. Leith, *Assembly of Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making*, (Richmond, 1973), pp. 75-76.

the immediate sources of some of the Westminster sections.”³³ As examples of this Reformed theology, Warfield notes John Calvin, John Ball, Gulielmus Bucanus, and then, borrowing at length on Heppe, he cites Amandus Polanus, Ludovicus Crocius, Marcus Friedrich Wendelin, Daniel Chamier, Franz Burman, and Johann Heinrich Heidegger as witnesses to his contention.³⁴ Indeed, there is little difference in doctrine and perspective between the divines of the Westminster Assembly and their continental Reformed orthodox counterparts. Specifically, we must repudiate as quite unsupported by the sources any attempt the claim that the continental Reformed theologians were led by their scholastic method to place reason prior to faith in their understanding of theological *principia*--or that “scholasticism” necessarily leads theology toward such a conclusion.³⁵”

The Westminster standards represent, therefore, in confessional form, the codification into a rule or norm of faith of the ground gained for English Reformed theology by Cartwright, Perkins, Ames, Rollock, Whittaker, and Gataker, and interpreted in the first half of the seventeenth century by Reynolds, Downname, Ussher, Fisher, Featley, Leigh and others. Of these thinkers, moreover, Reynolds and Gataker were among the authors of the confession, Featley was a member of the Westminster Assembly until 1648, Ussher (who wrote the *Irish Articles*) had been invited to serve in the Assembly, and Leigh was a member of Parliament following 1640 and appears to have attended some of the sessions. The confession and the catechisms would also provide the basis of fuller systematic theologies in the form of commentaries or catechetical lectures such as the catechetical systems of Watson and Ridgley or the commentary of Dickson.

All of the members of the committee for the Confession of Faith were drawn from the clerical side of the Assembly--none of the Lords or commoners who met at Westminster were asked to participate in the actual process of drafting the document. A fair majority of the members of the committee, moreover, were highly respected theologians and authors, although, arguably, two of the most expert exegetes at the Assembly, John Lightfoot and William Greenhill, did not serve on the committee.

³³Warfield, *Westminster Assembly and its Work*, p. 161.

³⁴Cf. the comments of John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, p. 325; it is simply a misreading of history to claim that the *Westminster Confession* is not the product of a scholastic and that the beginnings Protestant scholasticism in England can be marked in the slightly later work of John Owen: scholastic Protestantism was in full flower in England in the time of Perkins and the *Westminster Confession* is one of its contributions to the Reformed tradition: contra Rogers and McKim, *The Interpretation and Authority of Scripture*, pp. 202-203, 218-223.

³⁵Contra Rogers and McKim, *Interpretation and Authority*, pp. 106, 148, 165, 202-5, where the authors assume, without documentation, that a priority of faith over reason is characteristic of a Platonic approach and then, again without documentation, argues that the continental theologians of the era, as Aristotelians, must have placed reason before faith--as if the relation between faith and reason could be settled by appeal to these broad philosophical perspectives; cf. the far more accurate comments of Schaff in *Creeds*, I, p. 760: “the Westminster Confession sets forth the Calvinistic system in its scholastic maturity.... The confession had the benefit of the Continental theology...”; cf. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work*, pp. 159-169; and note the discussion of this issue in Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (2 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987-93), I, pp. 231-49 [hereinafter cited as *PRRD*] and idem, *Scholasticism and Orthodoxy in the Reformed Tradition: An Attempt at Definition* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1995).

3. THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE IN THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION

Records of the Westminster Assembly manifest no great debate over the subject of the first chapter of the proposed Confession. Several of the most important predecessors of the Confession—both Helvetic Confessions, the Genevan Harmony, and the Irish Articles—as well as many of the major systems of Reformed theology began with a discussion of the source of theology in the Scriptures. The other option, which became increasingly the model for full-scale systems, was to define “theology” and to speak of the knowledge of God in general before moving onto the Scriptural revelation.³⁶ Westminster does, in fact, note this latter order by commenting briefly on natural knowledge of God, indicating its insufficiency, and pointing to the necessity of the Scriptures. According to the confession, there are two sources, an inward and an outward, of this natural knowledge of God, “the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence.” These forms of revelation “do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary to salvation.”³⁷

The inability of humanity to attain right knowledge and true worship of God through the light of nature led God to “reveal himself and to declare his will unto his Church.”³⁸ It is worth noting here that neither the text of the confession nor the documents of Reformed theology in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries permit us to distinguish between a “two-source theory of revelation” typical of “scholastic theology” and a “personal revelation” theory characteristic of the Reformers and the Westminster standards.³⁹ Whether we look to Calvin, to the theology of representative Puritan and Reformed scholastic theologians, or to the *Westminster Confession* itself, we find

³⁶E.g., the Gallican (1559) and Belgic (1561) Confessions; and note Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae christianae*, new edition (Neukirchen, 1935); William Ames, *Medulla ss. theologiae* (Amsterdam, 1623; London, 1630) also, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. with intro. by John Dykstra Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim, 1966; reprint Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1984); Lucas Trelcatius, Jr., *Scholastica et methodica locorum communium Institutio* (London, 1604) trans. as *A Briefe Institution of the Commonplaces of Sacred Divinitie* (London, 1610); Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Geneva, 1617) and idem, *The Substance of the Christian Religion* (London, 1595).

³⁷*Westminster Confession*, I.i; cf. *Larger Catechism*, Q.2: “The very light of nature in man, and the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God; but his word and Spirit only do sufficiently and effectually reveal him unto men for their salvation.” In the following essay, I have used the text of the *Westminster Confession* found in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. 6th ed. (1931; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), III, pp. 600-673; all other confessional documents from the Assembly have been cited from *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994) which (despite its title) contains, in addition to the confession, the texts of both catechisms, the original prefatory letters, texts of the relevant churchly and parliamentary ordinances, the *Sum of Saving Knowledge*, the National Covenant, the Solemn League and Covenant, the *Directory for the Public Worship of God*, the *Form of Presbyterial Church Government*, and the *Directory for Worship*.

³⁸*Westminster Confession*, I.i; in Schaff, *Creeds*, III, 600 et seq.

³⁹So Rogers and McKim, *Interpretation and Authority*, p. 203; cf. Rogers, “Authority and Interpretation,” pp. 55-6, 58.

virtually the same basic set of assumptions: there is a divine revelation in the natural order,⁴⁰ and there is an innate sense of the divine in every rational human being⁴¹; because of the fall and sin, however, neither of these resources can provide a valid, much less a saving knowledge of God.⁴² A second source of revelation and, accompanying it, the redemptive and illuminative work of the Spirit as grounded on the saving work of Christ, is now necessary—and necessary in written form—in order for human beings to come to faith and to know of God rightly.⁴³ That second source is the biblical Word of God, of which Christ is the “foundation” and “scope.”⁴⁴

This juxtaposition of the insufficiency of natural revelation with the sufficiency of Scripture expresses the typical Reformed paradox of the natural knowledge of God: the “light of nature” and the “works of creation and providence” manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God enough to leave human beings inexcusable in their sin, but do not provide a revelation of God sufficient to save humanity. There is no denial of natural revelation, nor is there a denial of natural theology in a limited sense, but the noetic effect of sin is such that even Christian doctrines concerning the natural order, like creation and providence, will rest primarily on Scripture for their content. This is

⁴⁰In this, and the following three notes, I cite in order, a) Calvin and other sixteenth-century Reformed theologians, b) representative Westminster divines, c) English Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century who were not members of the Westminster Assembly; and d) continental orthodox or “scholastic” Reformed theologians. Thus, cf. a) John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (1559), ed. John T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (2 vols. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), I.v.1-2, 9-10; vi.1; Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci communes sacrae theologiae* (Basel, 1560; third edition, 1573), i; Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Common Places of Peter Martyr*, trans. Anthony Marten (London, 1583), I.ii.3; b) Anthony Burgess, *Spiritual Refining: or, a Treatise of Grace and Assurance* (London, 1652), pp. 692-4; William Twisse, *The Riches of God’s Love* (London, 1653), pp. 188-89; John Arrowsmith, *A Chaine of Principles* (Cambridge, 1659), p. 86-7; Edmund Calamy, *The Godly Mans Ark* (London, 1672), pp. 90-3; c) Edward Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity* (London, 1662), pp. 1-2, 10, 145; James Ussher, *A Body of Divinity, or the Sum and Substance of Christian Religion* (London, 1670), pp. 5-6; d) *Synopsis purioris theologiae, disputationibus quinquaginta duabus comprehensa ac conscripta per Johannem Polyandrum, Andream Rivetum, Antonium Walaeum, Antonium Thysium* (Leiden, 1625), I.viii; Francis Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (3 vols. Geneva, 1679-85; a new edition, Edinburgh, 1847), II.i.3-4.

⁴¹Cf. a) Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iii.1-3; Vermigli, *Common Places*, I.ii.3; b) John White, *A Way to the Tree of Life: Discovered in Sundry Directions for the Profitable Reading of the Scriptures* (London, 1647), pp. 13, 25; Arrowsmith, *A Chaine of Principles*, p. 128; William Bridge, *Scripture Light, the Most Sure Light* (London, 1656), pp. 32-3; c) Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, pp. 1-2, 145; Ussher, *Body of Divinity*, p. 3; d) *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, I.viii; Turretin, *Inst. theol. elencticae*, II.i.3-4.

⁴²Cf. a) Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.11-15; Vermigli, *Common Places*, I.ii.8; b) Burgess, *Spiritual Refining*, pp. 692-4; c) Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, p. 146; Ussher, *Body of Divinity*, p. 6; d) Pierre Du Moulin, *A Treatise of the Knowledge of God* (London, 1634), pp. 24-5, 36; Turretin, *Inst. theol. elencticae*, I.iv.3, 20.

⁴³Cf. a) Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vi.1-2; Musculus, *Loci communes*, i; Vermigli, *Common Places*, I.iv.15; b) White, *A Way to the Tree of Life*, pp. 25, 67-8; Arrowsmith, *A Chaine of Principles*, p. 86-7, 128; Calamy, *The Godly Mans Ark*, pp. 90-3; c) Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, pp. 101, 145-6; Ussher, *Body of Divinity*, pp. 6-7; d) *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, II.vi-ix; Turretin, *Inst. theol. elencticae*, II.i-ii.

⁴⁴Cf. Edward Reynolds, *An Explication of the Hundred and Tenth Psalm, wherein the Several Heads of the Christian Religion therein contained ... are largely explained and applied* (1632), in *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Edward Reynolds* (6 vols. London: B. Holdsworth, 1826, II, pp. 5-6; Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, fol. C1 recto; pp. 5, 7; Du Moulin, *A Treatise of the Knowledge of God* (London, 1634), pp. 56-7; Witsius, *De oeconomia foederum Dei cum hominibus libri quattuor* (Utrecht, 1694), IV.vi.2; Turretin, *Inst. theol. elencticae*, II.ii.1.

one of the themes resident in the *duplex cognitio dei* enunciated by Calvin as one of the formal principles of theology—and it is also an assumption held by Reformed orthodox writers of the seventeenth century.⁴⁵ (It is certainly not a point on which once can separate the theology of the Reformers from that of their orthodox successors.) It serves to press Reformed theology away from natural revelation toward the supernatural and, in view of the difficulty of preserving individual unwritten revelations and of the cessation of God's "former ways" of "revealing his will," toward recognition of the necessity of the written Word, as contained in the Old and New Testaments.

The confession therefore distinguishes between the direct revelation of God by various means to the faithful in ancient times and the inscripturation of that revelation. In continuity with the Reformed orthodox discussion of a distinction between written and unwritten word (*verbum agraphon* and *verbum engraphon*) that, prior to the writing of Scripture, "it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself and to declare his will unto his Church."⁴⁶ Not only continuing "corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world" but also the cessation of immediate revelations necessitated the careful compilation of God's Word: "for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment of the Church," God committed "the same" special revelation "wholly unto writing." This point, which can be found in Reformed theological documents from the time of the *Ten Theses of Bern* (1528) to the end of the era of scholastic orthodoxy, makes a significant historical point over against the Roman Catholic claims of a normative unwritten tradition and of the priority of an unwritten over the written Word. The Protestant rejoinder, echoed in the *Westminster Confession*, was that, from a historical perspective, it was quite true that an unwritten word preceded the written word—but equally so it was quite clear that the written Word had superseded the unwritten, and for very good reason. As Edward Leigh wrote, distinctly echoing the *Ten theses of Bern*, if we consider "the Word ... as written and clothed with words,... the Church was before Scripture," but if we consider "the matter and sense or meaning... the Scripture was more ancient than the Church, because the Church is gathered and governed by it."⁴⁷ And given the presence of the normative, written Word in the Scriptures, the *Westminster Confession* can conclude that "those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people [are] now ceased."⁴⁸

Scripture, thus otherwise identified as "the Word of God written," consists of the books of the Old and New Testaments. The confession enumerates the books and then states, with no further elaboration, "All of which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life."⁴⁹ The confession does not, as has often been noted, define a particular theory of inspiration: this is the case, at least in part, because of the various understandings of the relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit and the efforts of the human writers of Scripture present in the works of Puritan

⁴⁵Cf. Turretin, *Inst. theol. elencticae*, II.i.5.

⁴⁶*Westminster Confession*, I.i.

⁴⁷Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, I.ii (p. 24).

⁴⁸*Westminster Confession*, I.i; cf. the discussion in Muller, *PRRD*, II, pp. 182-210.

⁴⁹*Westminster Confession*, I.i-ii; cf. *Larger Catechism*, Q.3: "The holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience."

and Reformed orthodox writers of the era.⁵⁰ The lack of definition is certainly also due to the genre of the document: a confession, by nature, is not as detailed as a dogmatic treatise and, by intention, does not demand confessional commitment to the niceties of theological system. Nonetheless, examination of the writings of various Westminster divines evidences continuity between their formulations of the doctrine of inspiration and the formulations offered by continental theologians of the seventeenth century. John White held that “the holy Ghost not only suggested to [the Penmen of those sacred writings] the substance of the doctrine which they were to deliver... but besides hee supplied to them the very phrases, method, and whole order of those things that are written in the Scriptures.” Yet, in so inspiring the very words of the text, the Spirit in no way “altered the phrase and manner of speaking, wherewith custom and education had acquainted those that wrote the Scriptures” but rather “drew their naturall style to an higher pitch, in divine expressions, fitted to the subject in hand.”⁵¹ White explicitly compares the rougher style of Amos and James with the more elegant and learned styles of Isaiah and Paul.⁵² Typical of this view of inspiration is its juxtaposition of “words” with “substance”—*verba* with *res*--for the sake of arguing verbal inspiration of the text in the original languages but also, at the same time, stressing the importance of the things signified by the words, namely, the doctrines conveyed by the text. As David Dickson (echoing the *Shorter Catechism*) would comment on the *Westminster Confession*, ca. 1650, “Scripture” or “Word” indicates not so much “the bare letters or the several words” as “the Doctrine or Will of God,” the teaching found in the text.⁵³

The Apocrypha are to be excluded from this characterization, since they are not “of divine inspiration... and therefore as of no authority in the Church of God.”⁵⁴ Westminster enumerates the books in the canon but—in contrast to earlier post-Tridentine Reformed confessions—does not list the Apocrypha by name.⁵⁵ The identification of the canonical books as “the Word of God written” maintains the larger sense of “Word of God” found in the earlier confessions, as does the concluding statement of the confession that “the Supreme Judge of all controversies” in religion is “the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture.”⁵⁶ The canon and the text of the canon is genuinely Word, but it is also true that Word (in its prior sense as the Logos of God) and Spirit work through Scripture.

⁵⁰See Muller, *PRRD*, II, pp. 255-70.

⁵¹White, *A Way to the Tree of Life*, pp. 60-2; cf. *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, III.7; Pictet, *Theol. chr.*, I.vii.2; Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia*, I.ii.12; Witsius, *De prophetis et prophetia*, in *Miscellanea sacra libri IV* (Utrecht, 1692), I.iii.3; iv.1; and note the discussion in Muller, *PRRD*, II, pp. 255-71.

⁵²White, *A Way to the Tree of Life*, p. 62.

⁵³Dickson, *Truth's Victory Over Error*, p. 6; cf. *Shorter Catechism*, Q.2: “The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy [God]”; and see also Burmann, *Synopsis theologiae*, I.iii.2; Leigh, *Body of Divinity*, I.ii (p. 7); Turretin, *Inst. theol. elencticae*, II.ii.4 and note the discussion in Muller, *PRRD*, II, pp. 182-210.

⁵⁴*Westminster Confession*, I.iii.

⁵⁵Cf., e.g., *Irish Articles*, iii.

⁵⁶*Westminster Confession*, I.ii-iii, x.

Clearly drawing upon the debate between Protestant and Roman theologians over the role of the church in determining the authority of Scripture, in language reflecting nearly all of the orthodox Reformed theological systems, Westminster asserts:

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.⁵⁷

The authority of Scripture rests not on human testimony but on divine authorship.⁵⁸ The confession also balances its categorical statement of biblical authority with a series of collateral testimonies to the divinity of the text—in all of which, however, the word “authority” is lacking. In discussing how Scripture ought to be read and interpreted, the confession similarly balances outward testimony, objective marks of divinity, and the external exegetical analysis of text with the inward assurance of authority and inward illumination of the heart provided by the Holy Spirit.

Thus, even though the authority of Scripture in no way depends “upon the testimony of any man or church,” people are surely “moved and induced” to “an high and reverent esteem of the holy Scripture” by the Church.⁵⁹ The confessional point reflects distantly the Reformation debate over Augustine’s statement that had it not been for the church, he would not have believed the Gospel: to the Roman claim that Augustine, so often favorably cited by the Reformers, had acknowledged the authority of the church as prior to and necessary to the establishment of the authority of Scripture, Protestant theologians had replied that Augustine had certainly been moved to study Scripture by the church—and that this alone was the sense of his comment.⁶⁰ The church had directed Augustine toward Scripture, but the Scripture itself had demonstrated its authority to him. The point is important to the catholicity of the Reformation and, by extension, of the *Westminster Confession*: by affirming the authority of Scripture as resting on its identification as the Word of the divine Author while at the same time recognizing ecclesial location and recommendation of the text, the Westminster divines had in fact asserted the connection between their confession and the church of all ages.

Persuasion of the divinity of Scripture, like persuasion of its authority looks finally to God alone—but it is the case that some outward testimony or evidence must also be objectively present. Once again, we are in the company of Calvin, but also of later English and continental Reformed writers. None of these thinkers—certainly none of scholastic orthodox writers—ever thought to rest the authority of the text on empirical evidence of divine workmanship, but they nonetheless thought it important to state the objective marks of the divinity of the text.⁶¹ Given the divine authorship of Scripture—on an analogy with the divine authorship of the world—marks of the author or craftsman will be objectively present in his work. Thus, the divine authorship of the

⁵⁷*Westminster Confession*, I.iv; cf. Turretin, *Inst. theol. elencticae*, II.iv.1.

⁵⁸*Westminster Confession*, I.iv.

⁵⁹*Westminster Confession*, I.v.

⁶⁰Cf. Musculus, *Loci communes*, xxi (*Commonplaces*, pp. 365-7); Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.3; Leigh, *Treatise*, I.ii (p. 28) with the discussion in Muller, *PRRD*, II, pp. 358-82.

⁶¹Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.viii.1-13; Johannes Maccovius, *Loci communes theologici* (Amsterdam, 1658.), ii (pp. 25-6); Turretin, *Inst. theol. elencticae*, II.vi.6-7, 13; Johann Heinrich Heidegger, *Corpus theologiae* (Zurich, 1700), II.xii-xv; with the discussion in Muller, *PRRD*, II, pp. 282-300.

entirety of Scripture necessarily leads to “the consent of all the parts,” inasmuch as a single author (particularly an omniscient one!) will not disagree with himself. So too, “the scope” or focus “of the whole” of Scripture is “to give glory to God”—inasmuch as the whole is the revelation of God, authored by God himself. On the same ground, the substance or “matter” of the text exhibits a “heavenly” character and the doctrines propounded by this heavenly Word will have a saving “efficacy.”⁶² Similarly, people are moved to the acceptance of Scripture as authoritative by “the majesty of style,” and other marks of divinity found in Scripture, while their “full persuasion” comes only by the inward testimony of the Spirit.⁶³

As with the revelation imbedded in the created order, these signs of the divine can never be sufficient ground for belief or for salvation: the fallen human heart must be touched in its subjectivity by the Holy Spirit even for it to understand the objective marks of God’s work. Thus, after indicating that the Church testifies to the great value of the Scriptures while the style and contents, the scope and consistency, together with the obvious perfection of the Bible testify to its divine origin, the confession declares:

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.⁶⁴

Significant, here, is the reversal of the point made by the *Irish Articles*, namely, “we acknowledge [Scripture] to be given by the inspiration of God, and in that regard to be of most certain credit and highest authority”⁶⁵; the authority of Scripture is not grounded by Westminster on the concept of inspiration but rather on its nature as the Word of the divine author. The Westminster standards, thus, contradict Heppe’s thesis that orthodoxy moved away from the Reformation stress on Word toward a view of biblical authority grounded on the doctrine of inspiration—as if Word, authority, and inspiration were concepts that could easily be separated in the seventeenth-century mind.⁶⁶ The confession also maintains the Reformers’ emphasis on the internal testimony of the Spirit over the external or empirical evidences of the divinity of Scripture. In fact, this patterning of the argument was normative not only for Reformers like Calvin and Bullinger but also for the orthodox or scholastic Reformed theologians of the seventeenth-century: authority is not so much a conclusion to be drawn from inspiration as an immediate corollary of inspiration. “Authority,” after all, rests on the identity of the “author” and, in the case of Scripture, inspiration is the manner in which the

⁶²*Westminster Confession*, I.v.

⁶³*Westminster Confession*, I.v; cf. *Larger Catechism*, Q.4: “The scriptures manifest themselves to be the word of God, by their majesty and purity; by the consent of the parts, and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God; by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation: but the Spirit of God bearing witness by and with the scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very word of God.”

⁶⁴*Westminster Confession*, I.v; cf. *Larger Catechism*, Q.155: “The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of drawing them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ...”

⁶⁵*Irish Articles*, ii, ad fin.

⁶⁶Cf. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, revised and ed, Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (1950; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), pp. 16-17.

author works. The so-called “evidences of divinity” are necessary results of the divine working capable of being perceived by the faithful, not empirical grounds for belief.⁶⁷

Having made the basic point concerning the divinity and authority of the canonical Scriptures, the *Westminster Confession* moves on to address the content and the interpretation of the Bible. The sufficiency and fullness of the biblical revelation for the salvation of the world is stated and qualified with more precision and clarity than can be found in any earlier Reformed confession—“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.”⁶⁸ The biblical revelation, therefore, is sufficient to the task of saving the human race, but is also limited in scope.

The infallible truth of a verbally inspired text—which it was certainly the intention of the *Westminster Confession* to argue—is not to be confused with the infinite truth of God himself. Here, too, we encounter a reflection of the Reformed scholastic theological system, specifically, of its modest assumptions concerning Scripture and theology. Whereas God’s own truth is surely infinite, the truth presented by Scripture, albeit infallibly given, is by nature and necessity finite or “ectypal.” If Scripture is not *infinite*, it is nonetheless *sufficient* or entirely perfect to the accomplishment of its purpose. Here again, the confession is in full dialogue with the theology of Reformed orthodoxy: Scripture does not contain knowledge of all things, but only of “all things necessary” for the glory of God “and man’s salvation”—indeed, Scripture provides a “full discovery... of the only way of man’s salvation.”⁶⁹ In precise parallel with the words of the confession, Edward Leigh could declare, “The holy Scripture doth sufficiently contain and deliver all doctrines which are necessary to us for eternal salvation, both in respect of Faith and good works.”⁷⁰

There are, therefore, various “circumstances,” including some “concerning the worship of God and the government of the church” that are not explicitly defined in Scripture. These are “to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence.” And whereas “the general rules of the Word... are always to be observed,” we must not expect Scripture to offer explicit information about all things—not even all religious things.⁷¹ The doctrine of Scripture is thus safeguarded from a wooden rationalism and, in the life of the church, the realm of *adiaphora* is carefully marked out and preserved from a rigoristic biblicism.

The *Westminster Confession*, very much like the theology of the Reformers and of the Reformed orthodox, therefore, leaves a good deal of room for the use of reason and the examination of both nature and history. It also assumes, very much in accord with the Reformed theology of the seventeenth century, the Scripture does not—and need not—provide exhaustive information about the ancient world in general or even about the events that it describes in its own narrative. It is important to recognize, moreover, that these limitations do not stand in tension with

⁶⁷Cf. Muller, *PRRD*, II, pp. 270-302.

⁶⁸*Westminster Confession*, I.vi; more simply in the *Larger Catechism*, Q.5: “The scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man”; cf. *Shorter Catechism*, Q.3.

⁶⁹*Westminster Confession*, I.vi.

⁷⁰Leigh, *Treatise*, I.viii (p. 141); cf. Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia*, I.ii.19.

⁷¹*Westminster Confession*, I.vi.

or militate against the old Protestant doctrine of verbal inspiration, but in fact belong part and parcel to it: the Holy Spirit used the words, the thought patterns, and the training of a host of diverse human beings in the production of the biblical text. The biblical writers were, to be sure, preserved from their own fallibility, but their heads were not filled with extraneous information.

The confession also qualifies its doctrine of the sufficiency and fullness of Scripture with the traditional caveat that not all places in Scripture are clear and plain in their meaning.⁷² Nonetheless, it continues, all things “necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation” are stated clearly if not in one place in Scripture, then in another and are stated so clearly that “not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”⁷³ This relationship between the clarity, sufficiency and fullness of Scripture and the right of laity to own and read translations of the Bible is central to the orthodox Protestant doctrine Scripture: the declaration of clarity and sufficiency is in fact a declaration of the openness of Scripture to Christians generally set against the Roman Catholic reservation of interpretation to the church hierarchy. “Due use of ordinary means” points to the fact that saving doctrine is available to all—even when the niceties of Hebrew and Greek syntax in a particularly difficult passage may only be understood by a few scholars.

It is worth noting here, almost parenthetically, that this section of the confession points toward a churchly dialogue between exegesis and dogmatic formulation, biblical interpretation and catechesis, homiletics and systematic theology that was presumed necessary, by the seventeenth-century Reformed, for a healthy community of belief, but which is quite without parallel in our own times. Just as it is quite a simple matter to draw parallels between the theology of the *Westminster Confession* and that of the large-scale dogmatic systems of the era, it is also quite easy to move from the confession to the homiletical literature of the day and find close parallels—or from the homiletical literature to various commentaries and then back to the theological systems. Whereas, in other words, there are clearly various levels of difficulty in the theological expression of the day, there is no point in the spectrum of statement at which there is disjunction between lay piety and professional theology or between biblical exegesis and theological formulation.⁷⁴

In following the Reformers and the Reformed orthodox in setting aside the churchly hierarchy and, indeed, the tradition, as norms for the interpretation of Scripture, the *Westminster Confession* declares that Scripture itself is the guide to its own interpretation. This point is implied in the declaration that Scripture is the ultimate norm of doctrine, but it had not been stated explicitly in any of the great Reformed confessions prior to Westminster. Here, the hermeneutical principle of the *analogia Scripturae*, previously developed only in theological systems, attains confessional status. Scripture is the infallible rule of faith and life—and “the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.”⁷⁵ The difficult passages must be explained by comparison with the clearer passages and the body of Christian doctrine must be filled out by a process of drawing

⁷²*Westminster Confession*, I.vi.

⁷³*Westminster Confession*, I.vii; *Larger Catechism*, Q.156: “Although all are not to be permitted to read the word publickly to the congregation, yet all sorts of people are bound to read it apart by themselves, and with their families; to which end, the holy scriptures are to be translated out of the original into the vulgar languages”; *Directory for Family Worship*, p. 419: “in every family where there is any that can read, the holy scriptures should be read ordinarily to the family”; cf. Leigh, *Treatise*, I.viii (pp. 140-1).

⁷⁴See Muller, *PRRD*, II, pp. 525-40.

⁷⁵*Westminster Confession*, I.ix.

interpretive conclusions from the text. The point of the confession is not, however, that all texts in Scripture can be understood easily once the proper comparison has been made but only that the basic truths of Christianity are readily available either directly or by inference, and that the over arching scope and purpose of Scripture as a whole provide the best and surest guide to the understanding of particular passages that are unclear in themselves. Many texts will remain obscure—but Christians need not worry that these obscurities will jeopardize their salvation. This pattern for interpretation can be justified, moreover, by the fact that Scripture, governed as it is by “the whole counsel of God” has a single fundamental meaning: its “full sense... is not manifold but one.”⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the mere address of reason to the text does not produce salvation and there are some issues in the life of the church not directly addressed by Scripture. The confession assumes that a “saving understanding” of the Word, as distinct from a historical and rational understanding, rests on the inward illumination of the Spirit.⁷⁷

Even so, in Gillespie’s discussion of the normative character of necessary consequences drawn from the text, there is neither a recourse to unredeemed reason as a standard of authority nor an assumption that a normative truth in theology can arise somehow outside of Scripture by a process of deduction. Gillespie denies specifically that the reason used to draw the conclusion “can be the ground of our belief or conscience.” The ground for belief is not the rational process but the self-evidencing truth of the conclusion itself—and the conclusion, by implication, is not a creation of the mind of the reasoner but is lodged in the language of the text itself, as discerned by reason. Gillespie argues, moreover, that “natural reason arguing in divine things from natural and carnal principles” cannot draw the proper conclusions, but only “reason captivated and subdued to the obedience of Christ.”⁷⁸ His point parallels that made in the confession and by other theologians concerning the necessity of the illumination of the Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture and in the recognition of its authority.

It is important to note here that the *Westminster Confession* rests on what is often called a pre-critical hermeneutic—it shares, in other words, with the Reformers, and to a certain extent with the patristic and medieval exegetes, a perspective on the text and meaning of Scripture that separates it from the assumptions of modern historical-critical exegesis. Its doctrine of inspiration, parallel to the teaching of contemporary English and continental Reformed thinkers and in accord with the views of the Reformers, attributed primary authorship to God and a secondary, instrumental authorship to the human writers of the text. This double attribution of authorship allowed the Westminster divines and their contemporaries to explain the variety of style, viewpoint, and even the limited perspective of the biblical writers and at the same time to assume that the ultimate meaning of the text, as given by the divine author, was never to be exhausted by the original

⁷⁶*Westminster Confession*, cf. I.vi with ix; thus also, the *Larger Catechism*, Q.4 can speak of “the scope of the whole [of scripture], which is to give all glory to God.”

⁷⁷*Westminster Confession*, I.vi.

⁷⁸Gillespie, *Miscellany Questions*, p. 101; cf. Dickson, *Truths Victory over Error*, pp. 12-13; Gataker, *Shadowes without Substance*, p. 82; note also that the point is made by Zanchi, *Praefatiuncula in locos communes*, in *Operum theologorum* (8 vols. Geneva, 1617), vol. 8, cols. 417-18; William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture, against the Papists, especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, trans. and ed. by William Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), IX.5 (pp. 470-71); Leonhard Riissen, *Summa theologiae didactico-elencticae* (1695; Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1731), II.xii, xvii.

historical context of a biblical book or, indeed, of a pericope in the text.⁷⁹ Meaning was, of course, to be located in the literal sense of the words of the text, but the literal sense itself, given the ultimate author of Scripture, receives its significance from the scope and reference of the text in relation to the whole of the canon.

Thus, if the Westminster confession argues the necessity of translation and the propriety of the use of Scripture by the unlearned, it also insists upon the priority of the Hebrew and Greek originals of the books of the Bible and ultimately lodges all authority in the text as preserved in the ancient languages. The Hebrew and Greek texts are the “authentic” Scriptures that were “immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages.”⁸⁰ “Final appeal” in all religious controversy, therefore, must be to the text in the original languages rather than to translations. The detail, here, is once again greater than that of previous confessions, but it cannot be claimed that we have entered the realm of dogmatic system: there is no elaboration of discussion distinguishing between “Words” (*verba*) and “substance” (*res*) such as appears in the systems of the day--although the confession does consistently refer to the “matter,” i.e., the meaning or substance of the text that lies behind the words. There is also no discussion of the *autographa*, even in the seventeenth-century form of the argument, which simply argued for the priority of Hebrew and Greek as the language of the original “autograph” copies, without any attempt to enlist these no-longer existent texts for doctrinal argument. The emphasis of the confession, however, parallels this more detailed systematic argument by stressing the prior authority of the original-language texts currently known to the church.⁸¹

“The Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture” stands as the “Supreme Judge” of “all controversies of religion.”⁸² In this final statement, which subordinates “all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits” to the scriptural rule, the confession comes full circle in its discussion of authority and reflects on its earlier distinction between the outward, objective divinity of the text and the inward persuasion of the Spirit. The “sacred page” itself, brought forward in its objectivity, is the final rule of faith and practice, but only in the context of faithful listening to the Holy Spirit speaking. The point also relates to the assumption of the inspiration of Scripture: the Holy Spirit speaks in the words of the text, because the words of the text, albeit from the vocabulary and reflective of the thought-world of its human authors, are also the words chosen by God to be his Word. Or, similarly, this final point concerning the Spirit speaking in Scripture can also be connected directly with the older patterns of biblical interpretation indicated by the confession: the difficult passages are to be elucidated by the clearer passages, because the “true and full sense of any Scripture” can and ought to be searched out in other texts throughout the canon, and because the text speaks in a single, rather than in a manifold way. The point, in brief, is that the meaning of the text is lodged in the canonical whole in its on-going address to the church. This is not a dead text demanding archaeological examination, but a living text in and through which its

⁷⁹Cf. David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Precritical Exegesis,” in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 65-77 with idem, “Theology and Exegesis: Ten Theses,” in *ibid.*, p. 27; and, on seventeenth-century exegetical theory and practice see Muller, *PRRD*, II, pp. 487-525.

⁸⁰*Westminster Confession*, I.viii.

⁸¹Cf. the discussion in Muller, *PRRD*, II, pp. 418-37.

⁸²*Westminster Confession*, I.x.

primary Author, God, speaks by the Spirit: once again, the confession echoes both the theology and the hermeneutics of the day.

4. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In its opening paragraphs, this essay noted ongoing debate over the content and implication of the Westminster Confession. This debate has covered a host of topics—we have examined here only one, and the examination has been comparatively brief. On the topic of Scripture, as distinct from other debated topics like covenant and predestination, the contemporary discussion has been framed by the opposition of what might be called the “Old Princeton” interpretation offered by Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield (but also by Schaff and McNeill) and the more recent analysis offered by Jack B. Rogers. Whereas the present study makes no claim to settle and has no interest in dealing with the modern theological debate, between the proponents of these views, over the Reformed doctrine of Scripture, it does have some ramifications for the historical aspects of the debate. Inasmuch as a historical analysis of the *Westminster Confession* evidences precisely what one would expect—namely that the intellectual context for understanding its teaching is the Reformed theology of the mid-seventeenth century and that the English Reformed context reveals little substantive difference in the formulation of this particular doctrine from the continental Reformed theology of the time—we are left with a sense of a fundamentally correct *historical* assessment of the confession on the part of Schaff, Warfield, and McNeill and a fundamentally incorrect historical assessment on the part of Rogers, who attempts to drive a wedge between the English and the Continental Reformed theology of the era and to save the *Westminster Confession* from scholasticism.

We can also note that the confession’s echoes of the theology of the seventeenth century register the distinction of genres: the confession consistently stands in dialogue and positive relation with both the exegesis and the dogmatics of its day, but just as it does not reproduce the detail of exegetical works, so does it refrain from reproducing the detail of theological systems. It was written by clergy, exegetes, and theologians who had mastered the scholastic method during their university training—but who new the place of the method and who did not use it overtly in their confessional writings. The scholastic or disputative background of the confession is evidenced only by its clarity of definition and formulation and, when comparison is made, by the congruence of its teaching with the more elaborate argument of the dogmatic treatises and systems of the time. This congruence is also evident when comparison is made with commentaries on Scripture written around the time of the confession. The *Westminster Confession*, in other words, superbly served the church of its time—and may be called a model confessional synthesis of churchly theological and exegetical practices.

Our task in interpreting the *Westminster Confession* for the present ought to be defined as an effort to understand the document in its historical context and as a significant moment in our religious past—rather, surely, than to use it as a foil to be caricatured for the sake of elevating our own theological perspective. The confession may perhaps continue serve as a model for the integration of theological and hermeneutical concerns into a cohesive statement of basic beliefs. Our task, as I see it, in examining and receiving the confession today, if a historian may be so bold as to offer direction to theologians, ought not to be an effort to critique the confession as if it were a piece of twentieth-century theology. On the one hand, it is hardly a service either to the confession itself or to our own Reformed self-understanding to save the document by wrenching it out of its context and making it speak theologically in a way in which it was never intended to speak. If the only way to retain the confession for the church is to pretend that it was not written

during and does not reflect the era of scholastic orthodoxy, then the confession is better forgotten. On the other hand, whatever objections may have been levelled against the confession by such modern writers as Rolston and J. B. Torrance, the historical datum remains—in its own day the *Westminster Confession* was an eminently successful confessional document. It so expertly represented the older Reformed theology, whether dogmatic or exegetical, in confessional form that it has remained of normative use in the church for several centuries. For that achievement, at least, the document and its framers must be respected. The confession's fame will probably outlive that of its critics. Success in shedding some of the more negative and destructive prejudices of the present day may be, after all, a far, far better thing to do than some of us have ever done, and may result in a far, far better understanding of our Reformed roots than we have ever known.