

## Chapter 1 – *Of the Holy Scripture*

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' which the Westminster Divines placed at the head of their Confession and laid at the foundation of their system of doctrine. It has commanded the hearty admiration of all competent readers. (B.B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work*)

By beginning with the doctrine of Scripture, the divines follow the structure of the First and Second Helvetic Confessions (1536 and 1566) and Archbishop Ussher's Irish Articles (1615).

### 1.1 THE NECESSITY OF SCRIPTURE

'Although' introduces a contrast between general and special revelation.

General revelation is received in two ways:

- The internal 'light of nature' – what Calvin called the *sensus divinitatis*
- The external revelation in 'creation and providence'

General revelation is so clear and universal that it leaves sinners 'inexcusable'

And yet it is 'not sufficient' – further special revelation is necessary if we are to come to a saving knowledge of God. That special revelation has been inscripturated so that the truth can be protected and propagated.

### 1.2-3 THE CONTENT AND INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

In 1546 the Council of Trent had asserted that the deuterocanonical books of the Apocrypha were part of the Bible.

The sixth of the Thirty-Nine Articles had recommended the Apocrypha as useful for 'example of life and instruction in manners'. In contrast, the divines place it on the same level as 'other human writings'.

### 1.4-5 THE SELF-AUTHENTICATING AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Scripture's authority is derived from 'the Author', and so, the Bible is 'received because it is the Word of God' – as Calvin had argued, Scripture is *autopistos*, self-authenticating or self-convincing.

Although there are many evidences that support the authenticity of Scripture, ‘full persuasion’ requires ‘the inward work of the Holy Spirit’.

The Spirit does this ‘by and with the Word’ – in other words, the Spirit enables us to see the Bible for what it really is.

For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the internal witness of the Spirit. (Calvin, *Inst.* 1.7.4)

## 1.6 THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

There were two contemporary challenges to this doctrine:

- Enthusiasts who held to views of ‘new revelations of the Spirit’
- Roman Catholicism which granted authority to alleged unwritten apostolic ‘traditions’

The Confession teaches that Scripture reveals everything that is necessary for ‘salvation, faith, and life’.

The ‘whole counsel of God’ is not limited to what is ‘expressly set down in Scripture’, but also includes what may be deduced ‘by good and necessary consequences’. It was a hallmark of Socinianism to deny this point.<sup>1</sup>

This is best understood within the context of the English Reformation. In *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593) Richard Hooker set out to defend Episcopal polity and the worship of the English church against the reforms proposed by the Puritans.

A number of things there are for which the Scripture hath not provided by any law, but left them unto the careful discretion of the church; we are to search how the church in these cases may be well directed to make that provision by laws which is most convenient and fit. And what is so in these cases, partly Scripture and partly reason must teach to discern.<sup>2</sup>

Hooker was wary of the idea that a distinct form of church government was laid down in the Bible. He laid down the challenge to Puritans to explain their rationale.

And we may boldly deny, that of all those things which at this day are with so great necessity urged upon this church under the name of reformed church-discipline, there is any one which their books hitherto have made manifest to be contained in Scripture. Let them if they can allege but one properly belonging to

---

<sup>1</sup> C. J. Williams, ‘Good and Necessary Consequences the Westminster Confession’, in *The Faith Once Delivered to the Saints: Essays in Honor of Wayne R. Spear* ed. Anthony T. Selvaggio (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007), 171–90. Ryan M. McGraw, *By Good and Necessary Consequences* (Reformation Heritage, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2 vols. (Dent, 1958), 1.325.

their cause, and not common to them and us, and shew the deduction thereof out of Scripture be necessary.<sup>3</sup>

The divines were unwilling to concede that God had simply left the church without any direction on the nature of church government. What is expressed in this paragraph received systematic expression by George Gillespie, a Scottish commissioner to the WA, in his *Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (1649). He argued 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*’. He responded directly to Richard Hooker:

Although Hooker in his *Ecclesiastical Polity*, and other prelatial writings, did hold this difference between the Old and New Testament, that Christ and His apostles hath not descended into all particularities with us as Moses did with the Jews, yet, upon examination, it will be found that all the ordinances and holy things of the Christian church are no less determined and contained in the New Testament, that the ordinances of the Jewish church were determined in the Old, and that there were some necessary things left to be collected by necessary consequences from the law of Moses as well as now from the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

The divines found the Biblical basis for this approach in passages such as the following:

- Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven. But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living (Matt. 22:29-32).
- Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:25-27).
- And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene (Matt. 2:23).

Warfield summarized the significance of the example of the New Testament authors by stating that ‘the sense of Scripture is Scripture, and that men are bound by its whole sense in all its implications’.<sup>5</sup>

Speaking of the theologians represented at the Assembly, Muller has shown how they attempted to continue ‘the churchly tradition of theological exegesis as well as the critical labours of the textual scholar’. The drawing of logical conclusions appears to be one of the ‘final hermeneutical steps’ used to formulate theology from Scripture.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1.216.

<sup>4</sup> George Gillespie, *Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Ogle & Boyd, 1844), 102.

<sup>5</sup> B. B. Warfield, ‘The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture’, in *Works* 6.226.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Muller, *PRRD*, 2.61, 501.

Paragraph 6 concludes by pointing out that although we do not need new revelations of the Spirit, we do need the 'inward illumination of the Spirit' for the 'saving' knowledge of what is revealed in Scripture.

The 'light of nature' enables godly common sense to be applied.

### 1.7 THE CLARITY OR PERSPICUITY OF SCRIPTURE

Some passages are more difficult to understand and some understand them better than others. Nevertheless, 'those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation' are clear.

Such clarity gives every believer confidence to study the Bible using 'the ordinary means'.

### 1.8 THE PRESERVATION AND TRANSLATION OF SCRIPTURE

Because of God's 'singular care and providence' we have an authentic Bible.

The Council of Trent declared the Latin Vulgate to be the authentic version and the Index of Prohibited Books (1564) forbade any Roman Catholic to read or possess a copy of the Bible in the vernacular without a written licence.

### 1.9 THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

The Confession sets out three hermeneutical principles:

- We must interpret Scripture with Scripture
- In contrast to some medieval hermeneutics, we are told that the meaning of a passage is 'one' – this is a 'full' rather than narrow sense of meaning
- More difficult parts are to be interpreted in light of those parts 'that speak more clearly'

### 1.10 THE SUPREME AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

The chapter closes with a statement of *sola Scriptura* – 'the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures' is the 'supreme judge' in settling all disputes, and upon this 'we are to rest'.

The relationship between supreme and subordinate standards

**THE ASSEMBLY'S VIEW OF THE PREACHING MINISTRY <sup>7</sup>**

1. Preachers are ordained ambassadors
2. Ministers needed to be trained and equipped
3. Preachers must be known for their godliness
4. The faithful preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God
5. Preaching is the ordinary means of grace
6. Preaching is to be Christ-centred
7. Preaching relies on the Holy Spirit

Therefore the preacher is to be:

1. A scholar
2. A worshipper
3. An orator
4. An apologist
5. A pastor
6. A servant

---

<sup>7</sup> Chad van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors: The Westminster Assembly and the Reform of the English Pulpit* (Reformation Heritage, forthcoming).