

Our Faith



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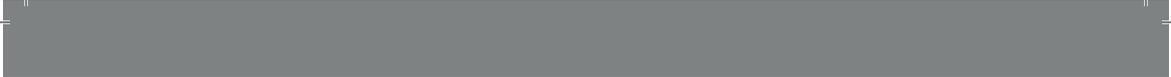
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Introduction

Confessing Our Faith

What is a confession of faith, and why is the Westminster Confession worth studying? Before we look at the contents of the Westminster Confession, we will take stock of some of the background principles.

What Is a Confession of Faith?

God has given us His Word so that we would have the information He wants us to know. A confession of faith is us putting in our own words what we understand God to be saying in His Word.

Some people say they have no creed but the Bible. But they still have their own interpretation of what the Bible teaches. They either do or don't believe in the Trinity, for example, or in baptising babies, or justification by faith alone. They just haven't written down their beliefs in a systematic form. They do have a creed, just not a publicly available one.

Meanwhile, all sorts of heretics can quote the Bible. So if we restricted ourselves to using only the words of Scripture, this would be an inadequate way of stating the truth. When someone quotes Scripture, it is always legitimate to ask, 'What do you mean by that?'

When a church does write down its understanding of what the Bible teaches, it allows anyone to see what it believes, and it also helps the church achieve clarity in its mission to tell the world what God's Word says.

Features of the Westminster Confession

The Westminster Confession of Faith was first published in England in 1646. Since then, it has become the official statement of faith for a number of different Christian churches in different countries.

Why has it been so widely used for such a long time? Because, among other reasons, it is biblical, it is detailed, and it is accessible.

1. Biblical

(a) Subordinate to Scripture

It is a basic principle of Christianity that God's Word is our ultimate authority. Scripture is the standard by which we must judge all other standards including our interpretations of what Scripture teaches. The Westminster Confession explicitly teaches this principle. It says:

'The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all opinions [and] doctrines of men are to be examined can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture' (WCF 1:10).

“... a confession of faith is not to add new doctrines into the mix; it simply states what Scripture already teaches.”

Some people worry that if you say you believe a confession of faith, you are adding something to Scripture and setting up an alternative source of authority. But the aim of a confession of faith is not to add new doctrines into the mix; it simply states what Scripture already teaches.

Again, the Westminster Confession explicitly teaches this principle: 'unto which [Scripture] nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men' (WCF 1:6).

Far from setting itself up as an alternative to Scripture or an equal to

Scripture, the Westminster Confession regards itself as subordinate to Scripture. It is scriptural because it directs us away from relying on its own authority and refers us back to Scripture as the ultimate authority.

(b) Required by Scripture

Although there is no verse in the Bible which commands, 'Thou shalt write a confession of faith,' the Bible does make it the responsibility of the Christian church to state and restate the truths of Scripture. A confession like the Westminster Confession helps us to fulfil various requirements:

- **Hold fast the form of sound words** (2 Timothy 1:13-14). Christianity is more than a lifestyle, a relationship, or an experience—it is informed by objective truths about God. A confession puts these truths into a summary form which we can keep, follow, and guard.
- **Confess with our mouths who God is and what He has done** (Romans 10:9-10). Those who are saved are expected to be witnesses to God and His truth—both in behaviour and in words.
- **Follow the example of Scripture.** The church has always had mini-creeds, brief summaries of essential truths such as, 'Jesus is Lord' (1 Corinthians 12:3; Philippians 2:11) (also Deuteronomy 6:4, Romans 10:9, 1 Timothy 3:16). The church has also issued detailed restatements of previously known doctrine to avoid misunderstanding and heresy (e.g., the Council of Jerusalem explaining justification by faith, Acts 15; John explaining the incarnation in his Gospel and Epistles; Paul explaining the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15).
- **Test the spirits** according to the difference between what they say and what the Spirit of God teaches (1 John 4:1-3), and guard against being carried away with diverse and strange doctrines (Hebrews 13:9).
- **Teach our children** (Psalm 34:11), giving them explanations to listen to as well as examples to look at.

(c) Derived from Scripture

All sorts of religious organisations have found it beneficial to state what they believe, from Roman Catholics to Mormons. It is not the fact of having a confession that matters, but how closely the teaching of your confession matches the teaching of Scripture. As you work through this study guide you will hopefully be able to see for yourself how tightly the Westminster Confession connects to what Scripture actually says.

Of course the Westminster Confession is not a complete statement of what the Bible teaches—it does not spell out everything the Bible says. But it is an accurate statement of biblical doctrine.

Additionally, the Westminster Confession closely follows Scripture in where it puts the emphasis. The major themes of Scripture are the major themes of the Westminster Confession: who God is and what God does; the fall of man into sin and its consequences; how Christ rescues sinners from their sin; and how saved sinners are to live their lives towards God and in their church community.

2. Detailed

Most religious organisations publish statements of faith where they confess what they believe about the core doctrines of Christianity. However, these statements are often very brief and minimalistic.

By contrast, the Westminster Confession is very detailed. Instead of minimalist, it is maximalist! It tackles controversial issues such as creation, baptism, election, assurance of salvation, forms of worship, and church discipline. Not all Christians share the same opinions on these issues, and not all these issues are essential for salvation.

So does this mean the detail of the Westminster Confession makes it divisive? Is it actually necessary to go into this level of detail?

“... the Westminster Confession is not a complete statement of what the Bible teaches—it does not spell out everything the Bible says. But it is an accurate statement of biblical doctrine.”

(a) Unifying not divisive

In reality, the fact that the Westminster Confession is so detailed makes it a better basis for unity among Christians than a minimalist confession. Minimalist confessions disguise disunity because they simply avoid talking about areas of disagreement. They also often operate in a context of many unwritten rules—even when they don't mention election, for example, everybody still knows that only Arminians and not Calvinists are welcome to join that organisation or speak in its name. With a detailed, maximalist confession, however, everyone knows where they stand. Those who are in full agreement with a detailed confession can work together in a spirit of frankness and wholeheartedness.

(b) Faithful not unnecessary

Although issues such as baptism and church discipline may not be essential to salvation, they are nevertheless things which Christians have opinions on, and things which Scripture reveals. When God reveals something in Scripture, then Christians do not have the option of ignoring it or acting as though it doesn't matter.

Even when opinion is split among Christians, a responsible church will not shy away from coming to the clearest possible understanding of what God's Word is teaching. This is a way of demonstrating their faithfulness and obedience to God's Word and the fact that they take God's revelation seriously. It helps people to see what the Bible really does teach, and it helps to close down the vague generalities which would otherwise be loopholes for error.

3. Accessible

The Westminster Confession covers very profound truths and uses very precise theological terminology. Yet it is not meant to go over the heads of ordinary people. It is accessible to people with no special theological training or particular interest in technical controversies. It serves the church well as both an outward-facing document—explaining to outsiders what the church believes, and an inward-facing document—articulating for ordinary believers the truths about the God we worship and His way of salvation.

How to Use a Confession of Faith

1. As a church

In the first instance, a confession of faith is a *statement of what the whole church believes*. The Westminster Confession is a formal, authoritative, and public definition of what God's people corporately confess about the truths of God's Word.

A church's confession, therefore, forms the *basis of union between believers and distinguishes them from everyone else*. If you hold the doctrines expressed in the church's confession, you belong to the church; if you don't, you belong somewhere else.

The church's confession is also an important *aid to transparency between office bearers and members*. Obviously there would be no point in the church issuing a confession if it only thought that it vaguely approximated what Scripture teaches, or just to leave it open for people to decide for themselves how far they thought it was scriptural. A church's confession is only functional when its office-bearers sign up to it because it is scriptural, not just insofar as they think it is scriptural. Only then can one office-bearer know what another believes, and only then can ordinary church members be confident about what their ministers and elders stand for.

To take an oath or vow that we believe the whole Confession without really believing all that it teaches is to seek to deceive God and others. The Confession itself asserts that oaths and vows ought to be taken 'in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation, or mental reservation' (WCF 22:4-5). If ministers and elders have stopped believing in the whole Confession, the only honourable thing to do is resign. If they are not honest about what they have

vowed to uphold and believe then how are they going to be honest when they speak about other things?

The church can then also use its confession to *shape how it teaches and disciplines* from the pulpit in any given congregation.

2. As an individual

Individual Christians have a responsibility not to remain isolated but to join themselves to the bigger body of Christ—the Christian church—and so to align themselves with the church's confession of faith. When they do this, the confession offers a way of structuring and a way of sharing.

(a) Structure in knowledge and devotion

People's personal grasp of the many doctrines taught in Scripture and from the pulpit can be quite fuzzy and patchy. The Westminster Confession offers a precise articulation of the key doctrines of Scripture in a systematic manner so that you can be *clear and orderly about the truth in your own mind*.

With a clear understanding in place, then you can *respond with the appropriate worship*. Our devotions can only be enhanced as we grow in an accurate knowledge of what God is like and what God has done. Our best devotional responses of praise and adoration spring

“A church's confession therefore forms the basis of union between believers and distinguishes them from everyone else.”

out of our best grasp of the identity of our Saviour and the nature of the salvation He provides.

(b) Sharing backwards and sharing forwards

Identifying with a church's confession of faith *puts you in contact with believers across time and place*. Each individual believer who embraces the Westminster Confession today joins a community of believers all over the world spanning hundreds of years.

The confession of faith also gives you something to *share with your friends and your own children*. It gives an objective content to your testimony when you share your testimony, and it gives a definite shape to your claim to be Bible-believing when you share Scripture itself. You can be confident that you are not simply transmitting some eccentric personal quirks when you pass on to the next generation of believers the contents of the Westminster Confession. This study guide aims to provide help for anyone approaching it for the first time in this way. We hope it will draw you into a deeper and more detailed understanding of the core truths of Scripture using the Confession.

How to Use this Study Guide

In this study guide, the beginning of each section gives a copy of the actual text of the *Westminster Confession*, highlighted with a grey background. Next comes *Things to Think About*, which gives an explanation of the teaching of that paragraph of the Confession. This material has been adapted with permission from *A Simplified Confession of Faith* by Maurice Roberts. It is not a replacement for the original Confession but simply an aid to help think through its meaning. If a section uses words or expressions that could still be difficult to understand after you read the explanation in *Things to Think About*, these words are defined in a *Glossary*.

There is also a list of *Scripture References* which are the passages of Scripture which the Westminster Assembly used to formulate their teaching. The verses are not given in full but a summary is provided to indicate the connection between the passages and the Confession's teaching.

At the end of each section there is a dotted box containing *Questions* for you to check your understanding of what the Westminster Confession is teaching. Although this is not identified, the questions are at different levels. This is because different individuals/groups will be at differing levels of understanding in relation to the Confession. Please use the questions and material at the most appropriate level. *Outline Answers* are provided at the end of the book—these are not exhaustive but will help you see whether your answers are on the right lines.

At the end of each chapter of the Confession, you will find a list of *Cross-References* to questions in the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism. These catechisms were designed to give more light on the teaching of the Confession in structures which focus on the personal, practical application of the Confession's teaching. Following up these references will allow you to continue exploring the Westminster Confession, and its meaning, using the tools it was originally supplied with.

Chapter 1

What We Believe About Holy Scripture

The Westminster Confession opens with a chapter on Scripture. Because Scripture is what God has given us to inform us about Himself and His will, it is fundamentally important to get Scripture right. With its various affirmations about the identity and nature of Holy Scripture, the Confession fixes its terms of reference from the outset. What we believe about Scripture will shape what we believe about all the other topics handled in the Confession.

1.1 Scripture Is Necessary

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 inexcusable; 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.

Things to Think About

All people, since they are created in God's image, and live in the world created and ordered by God, have some idea of God and His goodness, wisdom, and power.

This general revelation is sufficiently informative to leave people without excuse for their sin, but it is not sufficient for anyone to be saved.

For this reason God has given us a special revelation of Himself. He previously revealed Himself at various times and in various ways (e.g., prophetic dreams and visions, the ministry of angels, types, figurative actions by prophets, etc.). But these ways of revelation have now ceased. He has now given us the Holy Scriptures, a complete written record of what He wants us to know.

Compared to the previous ways of receiving God's revelation, having the Scriptures in writing is a better way of preserving and spreading the truth, and of making the church more secure and better comforted against the corruption of the flesh (which is prone to forget or misremember), and the malice of Satan and the world (who actively wish to destroy the memory of God's revelation). For these reasons, Scripture is necessary for salvation.



Glossary

- **Light of nature**—the knowledge and powers of reasoning which humans have by nature, i.e., innately from the way God created us, including principles of moral right and wrong.
- **Sundry times and divers manners**—(a reference to Hebrews 1:1) various different times and various different ways.
- **Propagating**—spreading.
- **Commit**—put into a form that can be kept or preserved.
- **The same**—it, what has previously been mentioned (i.e., here God's revelation of Himself and His will).

Scripture References

- *Romans 2:14-15, Romans 1:19-20, Psalm 19:1-3, Romans 1:32 with Romans 2:1.* Creation, providence, and the light of nature reveal enough of God and His attributes that our sin is inexcusable.
- *1 Corinthians 1:21, 1 Corinthians 2:13-14.* The knowledge of God which is necessary for salvation is not available from general revelation.
- *Hebrews 1:1.* God has revealed Himself to His church.
- *Proverbs 22:19-21, Luke 1:3-4, Romans 15:4, Matthew 4:4, 7, 10, Isaiah 8:19-20.* God has put His revelation in writing, to give us certainty and comfort about His will for salvation.
- *2 Timothy 3:15, 2 Peter 1:19.* It is necessary to take heed to the Scriptures if we are to be saved.
- *Hebrews 1:1-2.* God no longer speaks in the various ways He used to use.

Questions

1. Why do we need the Lord's special revelation of Himself in Scripture?
2. Why is it necessary for us to have the Scriptures, i.e., God's revelation in written form?
3. Now that God's special revelation has been committed to writing, can we find it anywhere else?

1.2 Scripture Is Inspired

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

Old Testament

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

New Testament

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, The Acts of the Apostles, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Revelation.

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

Things to Think About

What is meant by Holy Scripture, or the written Word of God, is the listed books of the Old and New Testaments.

All and only these sixty-six books are given by inspiration of God. When we say the Scripture is inspired, this means that it was breathed out by the Spirit of God, who carried the writers along in such a way that what they wrote was exactly what God intended them to write.

God has given us the Scripture to be our rule of faith and life, or in other words, the ultimate authoritative standard of what we are to believe and how we are to behave.

Glossary

- **Rule (of faith and life)**—ultimate authoritative standard (of faith, i.e., what we are to believe, and life, i.e., how we are to behave).

Scripture References

- *Luke 16:29, 31, Ephesians 2:20, Revelation 22:18-19, 2 Timothy 3:16.* The books of the prophets and apostles are given by inspiration of God.

Questions

4. What do we mean by Holy Scripture?
5. How many books are there in the Old Testament? and the New Testament?
6. What is meant by inspiration?
7. What is meant by a rule of faith and life?
8. Many other things compete with the Bible to dictate our faith and life. Can you explain why these are unsuitable to be our rule of faith and life: (a) conscience, (b) the traditions of the godly, (c) other sacred texts such as the Quran or the Book of Mormon, (d) charismatic revelations?

1.3 Scripture Is Unique

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.

Things to Think About

Books which are not inspired by God are not included in the canon of Scripture. The sixty-six books listed in Section 1.2 make up the canon of Scripture, i.e., the complete authoritative rule which God has given us. The books commonly called the Apocrypha are not included in the canon of Scripture. Therefore the Apocrypha have no authority in the church of God, and are only to be approved of and used in the same way as other human writings.

Glossary

- **Apocrypha**—a collection of books which were classified as canonical by the Roman Catholic Church in 1546. They include some useful material, and some material which is morally and theologically unacceptable. They were not regarded as inspired by the Jews, or by Jesus.
- **Canon**—literally, a ‘rule,’ and in conventional use, the established, definitive list of inspired books.

Scripture References

- *Luke 24:27, 44, Romans 3:2, 2 Peter 1:21.* Jesus endorsed the books of the Old Testament, excluding the Apocryphal books.

Questions

9. If a writing isn't divinely inspired, can we regard it as belonging to Scripture?

1.4 Scripture Is the Word of God

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.

Things to Think About

The authority of Scripture as our rule of faith and life depends entirely on the authority of God, its author, who is truth. The authority of Scripture does not depend on the testimony of any individual or church. We receive Scripture because it is the Word of God.

🔍 Scripture References

- *2 Peter 1:19, 21, 2 Timothy 3:16, 1 John 5:9, 1 Thessalonians 2:13.* We receive the Scripture because it is in truth the Word of God, authored by the Holy Spirit.

💬 Questions

10. On what authority do we receive the Scripture?

1.5 Scripture Is Verified

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to a 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.

Things to Think About

The testimony of the Christian church to the identity and authority of the Scripture can help us view Scripture with high and reverent esteem. There are also many wonderful characteristics of the Scripture which evidence it to be the Word of God. These include its heavenly content, its powerful doctrine, its majestic style, the way its individual parts agree with each other, its overarching purpose (which is to give all glory to God), the complete revelation it gives of the only way of salvation, its many other unique excellencies, and its entire perfection. Nevertheless, we cannot have a full persuasion and assurance of its infallibility and authority unless the Holy Spirit works inwardly to bear witness by and with the Word in our hearts.



Glossary

- **Moved and induced**—prompted, encouraged, influenced.
- **Matter**—contents.
- **Efficacy**—effectiveness.
- **Consent**—agreement.
- **Scope**—purpose, aim, target.
- **Discovery**—revelation.
- **Assurance**—certainty.



Scripture References

- *1 Timothy 3:15*. The church is the place where the truth is displayed in the world (so we should listen to its testimony).
- *1 John 2:20, 27, John 16:13-14, 1 Corinthians 2:10-12, Isaiah 59:21*. We need the Holy Spirit to bring us to the right attitude to God's Word.



Questions

11. The testimony of the church and the excellent features exhibited by the Bible are important for helping us to recognise it as the Word of God. Do we need anything else to persuade us fully?
12. When we have difficulty believing the infallible truth and divine authority of the Bible, is this because of something to do with the Bible or something to do with us?