A modern exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith

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EP Books are distributed in the USA by:
JPL Distribution
3741 Linden Avenue Southeast
Grand Rapids, MI 49548
E-mail: orders@jpldistribution.com
Tel: 877.683.6935

First published 1989

This (fifth) edition 2016

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available

ISBN: 978–1–78397–187–9

Unless otherwise indicated. Scripture quotations in this publication are from the New American Standard Bible.

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Preface to the second edition

In order that the first English edition of this work might appear in some proximity to the 300th anniversary of the Confession which it expounds, I did not burden either myself or its publishers with the production of a preface to it at the time of publication. Now that God in his great kindness has seen fit to give this work some usefulness among the churches so that a Spanish translation is projected and a second English edition is being considered, it is important that certain matters related to this work be clarified. Since the publication of the first edition, I have come to an increasing awareness that some may feel that I have taken undue liberty in altering and expanding the prooftexts which accompanied the Confession in the copies of it with which I was working. Let me make very clear, therefore, that while I have preserved with some care the text of the Confession in this work, the prooftexts have been altered and expanded. These revised and enlarged prooftexts, when used in conjunction with the analytical outline given of each chapter, are intended to supply the studious reader with the raw materials with which to expand the necessarily selective and compressed exposition which this work provides.

A number of errata which crept into the first edition have now been corrected. A small number of these substantially changed the sense of my statements in a negative direction. Allow me to clear up any confusion about my orthodoxy by pointing these out in the preface.

On page 30 the four major attributes of Scripture associated with the Reformation ought to be 'its necessity, its *authority*, its sufficiency and its clarity'. On page 66 when discussing God's decree, I intended to say that God 'does *not* by his own immediate causation' bring sin to pass. On page 180 I intended to say that 'The basic activities which the Word of God demands of us in the prosecution of ongoing sanctification can be summarized under two headings: confident *reckoning* and strenuous working.'

Much of the credit for whatever value this manuscript may possess must be given to three parties. Without the large, enlightened and biblical views of the eldership held by the Reformed Baptist Church of Grand Rapids and my esteemed fellow pastor, Mr. Jim Hufstetler, this work would probably never have been conceived. Without the devoted editorial labors of our church's secretary, Mrs. Jane Borduin, and my fellow pastor, Mr. David Merck, I am convinced that the errata mentioned above would have been multiplied and the usefulness of this book greatly minimized.

Preface to the third edition

Since the publication of a second edition, several brethren have kindly assisted me in identifying a number of inaccuracies in the previous editions. I hereby express my gratitude to them all. The most important changes have to do with my discovery that the edition of the Confession with which I was working contained minor inconsistencies with the original wording of the 1689 Baptist Confession at a number of points. I have attempted in this edition to correct these inconsistencies wherever they seem significant to me. I believe all significant inconsistencies have now been removed. The most important of these involved changes on pages 148 and 149 of the book. Someone in the history of the Confession removed the first word of chapter 10, paragraph 3, making the paragraph begin, 'Infants dying in infancy', rather than 'Elect infants dying in infancy'. I have a rough guess that the one responsible for this change might have been a famous and beloved Baptist preacher in England in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but I must hasten to confess that I do not know for sure.

I have also corrected a minor inaccuracy on page 428 having to do with the circumstances of the origin of the Confession. I am given to understand that there is no good evidence for a general meeting of Baptists in 1677. I am also given to understand that it is very possible that the co-pastor of William Collins, Nehemiah Coxe, assisted in the framing of the 1689 Baptist Confession.

Preface to 5th edition (August, 2016)

It is right and appropriate that prefaces like this one include thanks to the many persons which make them possible. Thanks, first of all, must be given to the Triune God who in His gracious providence has given the effort to serve His church through this book a usefulness far beyond what I could ever have expected. First published in 1989 this is now the Fifth Edition of *A Modern Exposition* in English. It has also been translated into Spanish, German, Russian, and Romanian. I am both amazed and deeply grateful to a gracious providence for the privilege of being thus useful to the church of God.

Many people have been the human instruments of this gracious providence. Evangelical Press and its Managing Director, Graham Hind, have made my dealings with this publishing company a genuine pleasure over the last several years. Without his and their support for this project, it would not have seen the light of day. I am also grateful to the Administrator of Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary, Rex Semrad, who with his daughter Danielle have gone above and beyond the call of duty to help with preparation and editing of this 5th Edition. I cannot fail to mention my beloved wife, Charlene, who through the years keeps putting me back together when I am about to fall apart and who has been my faithful comfort, companion, and friend for over 41 years of marriage.

Let me say something about the reason and necessity for this 5th

Edition. In the 2nd and 3rd Editions of *A Modern Exposition* a number of important improvements to the first edition were made. You can see what they were by reading the prefaces repeated in the previous pages. Somehow in the 4th Edition published in 2009 these improvements were forgotten and the manuscript reverted to its original (1st Edition) form with all of its inaccuracies. I only discovered the extent of the problem in the last year. Graham Hind Evangelical Press immediately responded to the problem by withdrawing the remaining unsold copies of the 4th Edition from circulation for sale. They also agreed to publish this 5th Edition as soon as I could prepare it for publication.

In this 5th Edition of *A Modern Exposition* the improvements found in the 2nd and 3rd Editions are restored. I have made further (what I think to be) improvements by revising two appendices found in previous editions and adding two more. The reader (in my opinion) will be greatly helped by turning to the back of the book and reading these appendices first.

Finally, let me dedicate to Dr. Robert Paul Martin and his family this 5th Edition of *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist* Confession. His *Introduction on the Legitimacy and Use of Confessions* has stood at the beginning of *A Modern Exposition* in each of its editions including the present one. He has in my view never received the credit he deserves for that outstanding little essay. "Dr. Bob" passed away a few months ago in 2016, but his godliness and labors for Christ's Kingdom are not forgotten.

Sam Waldron
August 2016

Introduction:
THE LEGITIMACY AND USE OF CONFESSIONS

The year 1989 marks the 300th anniversary of the publication of the Second London Confession (also known as the Assembly Confession or The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689). Although it was written and published anonymously in 1677, after the ascension of William and Mary to the throne of England and the Act of Toleration, the Particular Baptists of England met in open assembly, signed their names to the confession and republished it for the consideration of the Christian public. The Westminster Confession of 1647 was used as the basic framework of the Second London Confession, albeit with modifications. Some of these modifications were the work of those who drew up the confession; others were adopted from the Savoy Declaration published by the Independents in 1658 and from the First London Baptist Confession of 1644. The purpose for this method was to show, wherever possible, the continuity of faith which existed between the Particular Baptists and their other reformed brethren in Great Britain. Today reformed Baptists hold the Second London Confession in high esteem and many of the churches continue to regard it as their official statement of faith.

The enthusiasm, however, which many have for the great reformed confessions is not shared by everyone. Sadly we live in a non-credal, even an anti-credal, age marked by existential relativism,

anti-authoritarianism and historical isolationism. Many professing Christians regard creeds and confessions of faith as man-made traditions, the precepts of men, mere religious opinions. Speaking of his day, Horatius Bonar said,

> Every new utterance of skepticism, especially on religious subjects, and by so-called "religious" men, is cheered as another howl of that storm that is to send all creeds to the bottom of the sea; the flowing or receding tide is watched, not for the appearance of truth above the waters, but for the submergence of dogma. To any book or doctrine or creed that leaves men at liberty to worship what god they please, there is no objection; but to anything that would fix their relationship to God, that would infer their responsibility for their faith, that would imply that God has made an authoritative announcement as to what they are to believe, they object, with protestation in the name of injured liberty.[1]

One wonders what Bonar would say today. Those who conscientiously defend the great reformed confessions are regarded as anachronisms, if not as enemies of the faith and of the church. In some circles we are censured and avoided; and if we attempt to convince others of the benefits of confessional Christianity and of the dangers of doctrinal latitudinarianism, we are stigmatized as infected with 'creeping credalism', the theological and ecclesiastical equivalent of leprosy. In such a climate, it is important that those who love the reformed confessions have clear views of the legitimacy of confessions and of their many beneficial uses.

A. The legitimacy of confessions

The Bible says that the church is 'the pillar and ground of the truth' (1 Timothy 3:15). The term *stulos* (pillar) refers to a column which supports a building; and *hedraioma* (ground) refers to the base or foundation of a structure. The 'truth' to which the text refers is the revelation which God made to men, i.e., that special revelation which

1 From Bonar's preface to *Catechisms of the Scottish Reformation* (London: 1866). Reprinted as "Religion without Theology," *Banner of Truth* 93 (June 1971): 37.

began in Eden and which ended with the establishment of the New Covenant, that revelation which has as its central focus 'the mystery of godliness', the gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 3:16).

By calling the church 'the pillar and ground of the truth', the Bible teaches us that the revelation which God has given for the salvation of men has been entrusted to the church, i.e., to an institution which was designed and purposed by God to preserve the truth pure, to defend it against error and against the attacks of its enemies, and to commit it undiluted and unadulterated to future generations. The church was created as a divinely ordered human society for the support and promotion of revealed truth in the world. This, of course, makes the church indispensable, just as indispensable as the pillar or foundation of a house.

In carrying out its duty (both to those within the church and to those without) as 'the pillar and ground of the truth', among other things the church has published confessions of faith, an activity which historically it has regarded as a lawful means for the fulfillment of its duty. But whenever the church has published such confessional standards, voices have been raised to challenge the legitimacy of its having done so. Two basic objections have been raised.

1. Some argue against the legitimacy of confessions on the premise that confessions of faith undermine the sole authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice.

The cry is often heard 'No creed but the Bible.' In some cases this affirmation is worthy of respect, for some appear genuinely to be motivated by the recognition that the Bible has a unique place in the regulation of the church's faith and life. Nevertheless, it is naïve to believe that the church wholly discharges its duty as the pillar and ground of the truth by proclaiming that it believes the Bible. Most heretics will be willing to say the same thing. One writer proclaims, 'To arrive at the truth we must dismiss religious prejudices … We must let God speak for himself … Our appeal is to the Bible for truth.' The

problem with this statement, of course, is that it is drawn from *Let God be True*, published by the Jehovah's Witnesses.[2]

In the same vein, consider Samuel Miller's observations on the Council of Nicea: 'When the Council entered on the examination of the subject [of Arius's view of the divinity of Christ], it was found extremely difficult to obtain from Arius any satisfactory explanation of his views. He was not only as ready as the most orthodox divine present to profess that he believed the Bible; but he also declared himself willing to adopt, as his own, all the language of the Scriptures, in detail, concerning the person and character of the blessed Redeemer. But when the members of the Council wished to ascertain in what sense he understood this language, he discovered a disposition to evade and equivocate, and actually, for a considerable time, baffled the attempts of the most ingenious of the orthodox to specify his errors, and to bring them to light. He declared that he was perfectly willing to employ the popular language on the subject in controversy; and wished to have it believed that he differed very little from the body of the church. Accordingly the orthodox went over the various titles of Christ plainly expressive of divinity, such as "God"—"the true God", the "express image of God", etc.—to every one of which Arius and his followers most readily subscribed—claiming a right, however, to put their own construction on the scriptural tides in question. After employing much time and ingenuity in vain, in endeavouring to drag this artful thief from his lurking places, and to obtain from him an explanation of his views, the Council found it would be impossible to accomplish their object as long as they permitted him to entrench himself behind a mere general profession of belief in the Bible. They, therefore, did, what common sense, as well as the Word of God, had taught the church to do in all preceding times, and what alone can enable her to detect the artful advocate of error. They expressed, in their own language, what they supposed to be the doctrine of Scripture concerning the divinity of the Saviour; in other words, they drew up a Confession of Faith on this subject, which they called upon Arius

2 Quoted by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., "In Defense of Creedalism," *Banner of Truth* 211 (April 1981): 6.

and his disciples to subscribe. This the heretics refused: and were thus virtually brought to the acknowledgement that they did not understand the Scriptures as the rest of the Council understood them, and, of course, that the charge against them was correct.'[3]

A confession of our loyalty to the Bible is not enough. The most radical denials of biblical truth frequently coexist with a professed regard for the authority and the testimony of the Bible. When men use the very words of the Bible to promote heresy, when the Word of truth is perverted to serve error, nothing less than a confession of faith will serve publicly to draw the lines between truth and error.

If we were to accord to our confessions a place equal with the Bible in authority, we would undermine the sole authority of the Bible as the regulator of the church's faith and practice. This, however, was not the intent of those who drew up the reformed standards. They acknowledged the unique place of the Bible, recognized that they were fallible men, and reflected these perspectives in the confessions themselves. Note the statements of the Baptist Confession of 1689: 'The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience' (1.1). 'The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men' (1.6).

The great reformed confessions do not claim to make anything truth that was not truth before; nor do they propose to bind men to believe anything which they are not already obligated to believe on the authority of Scripture.

A creed or confession is simply a statement of faith (*credo* means 'I believe'); and as such no more diminishes the Bible's authority than saying 'I believe in God' or 'I believe in Christ' or 'I believe in the Bible.' Those who say that they affirm 'no creed but the Bible' in reality

3 Samuel Miller, *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1839; reprint ed. Greenville, SC: A Press, 1987), pp. 33–35.

have a creed, albeit an unwritten one. Professor Murray argued: 'In the acceptance of Scripture as the Word of God and the rule of faith and life, there is the incipient and basic credal confession .... [for it excludes] all other norms of faith and conduct. But why should credal confession be restricted to the doctrine of Scripture?'[4]

If adherents to heretical or cultic doctrines and practices are barred from membership in a local church, if officers and members must hold certain doctrines as truth, then *ipso facto* there is a commonly acknowledged creed. In such churches the creed is as real as if each member possessed a printed copy. Yet, under non-credal principles, all should be welcome without discrimination, as long as they can say, 'I believe the Bible.'

The truth is that the most vigorous opposers of confessions of faith use their unpublished creeds in their ecclesiastical proceedings and are just as 'credal' as the credalists they harangue. Thomas and Alexander Campbell thought that they could remove the evils of what they called 'sectarianism' by gathering a Christian communion without any creed of human construction, with no bond except faith in Jesus as Saviour and a professed determination to obey his Word. They argued that the problem with the visible church was that it was divided and that creeds and confessions were the cause. The fruits of their efforts, the so-called 'Churches of Christ', are among the most sectarian and 'credal' congregations to be found anywhere.

To those who are concerned that confessions of faith undermine the authority of the Bible, we affirm without reservation that the ultimate ground of the Christian's faith and practice is the Bible, not our confessions of faith. But this does not mean that it is illegitimate for those who agree in their judgements as to the doctrines of the Bible to express that agreement in written form and to regard themselves as bound to walk by the same rule of faith. As A. A. Hodge observed, 'The real question is not, as often pretended, between the Word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of

4 Murray, *Collected Writings*, 1:281.

the collective body of God's people, and the private judgement and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds.'[5]

2. Others argue against the legitimacy of confessions on the premise that confessions of faith are inconsistent with liberty of conscience before God. Two kinds of men argue in this fashion.

Firstly, some who say this regard all authority, whether scriptural or confessional, as injurious to the liberty of their consciences. Having rebelled against the higher standard of the Bible, it is no mystery that they chafe under the lesser authority of a confession; having spit out the camel, it is no marvel that they dispose of the gnat so easily. Such men regard "free-thinking" and "free inquiry" as their birthright. Yet instead of desiring to be free so that their consciences may follow Scripture (which is what they affirm as their motivation), they really want to be free from the constraint of the Bible on the formation and propagation of their religious opinions.

Shedd called such men 'latitudinarian bigots', who in reality hate precision, not love liberty, and who desire to impose their latitudinarian bigotry on everyone.[6] Miller observed, 'Whenever a group of men began to slide, with respect to orthodoxy, they generally attempted to break, if not to conceal, their fall, by declaiming against creeds and confessions.'[7] At the beginning of their protests, such men generally claim allegiance to the doctrines of the confession but not to the principle of confessions. Time generally exposes their hypocrisy. 'Men are seldom opposed to creeds, until creeds have become opposed to them.'[8] Concerning such men we can only say that as long as their consciences are not bound by the Word of God, a confession of faith will do them no injury, except to expose them as hypocrites or heretics!

Secondly, for others the objection based on an appeal to liberty of conscience is merely a corollary to the previous objection, i.e., the

5 A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (reprint ed., London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), p. 2.
6 W. G. T. Shedd, *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), pp. 167–68.
7 Miller, p. 40.
8 Ibid.

concern for the authority of Scripture. These folk seem genuinely to be seeking to defend the premise that the conscience is to be bound only by the authority of the Word of God. To such we say that the confession acknowledges that God alone is the Lord of the conscience: 'God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or not contained in it. So that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also' (21.2).

Fears concerning liberty of conscience would be justified if subscription to a confession were required without the subscriber being able to examine the articles of faith, or if subscription is enforced by civil penalty. But if one is persuaded that the content of the confession is biblical and if subscription is voluntary, then a confession of faith does no injury to one's conscience. A man is at liberty at any time to renounce the church's confession if he can no longer with a clear conscience subscribe to it. And he is at liberty to join himself to a congregation where he can fellowship with a clear conscience.

Miller rightly argues that to deny to a group of Christians the right to frame a confession and the right to subscribe to it would be to deny to them true liberty of conscience: 'It will not, surely, be denied by anyone, that a body of Christians have a right, in every free country, to associate and walk together upon such principles as they may choose to agree upon, not inconsistent with public order. They have a right to agree and declare how they understand the Scriptures; what articles found in Scripture they concur in considering as fundamental; and in what manner they will have their public preaching and polity conducted, for the edification of themselves and their children. They have no right, indeed, to decide or to judge for others, nor can they compel any man to join them. But it is surely their privilege to judge for themselves; to agree upon the plan of their own association; to determine upon what principles they will receive other members into their brotherhood; and to form a set of rules which will exclude

from their body those with whom they cannot walk in harmony. The question is, not whether they make in all cases a wise and scriptural use of this right to follow the dictates of conscience, but whether they possess the right at all? They are, indeed, accountable for the use which they make of it, and solemnly accountable, to their Master in heaven; but to man they surely cannot, and ought not, to be compelled to give any account. It is their own concern. Their fellow-men have nothing to do with it, as long as they commit no offence against the public peace. To decide otherwise would indeed be an outrage on the right of private judgment.[9]

In principle, any doctrinal or moral aberration can come into the church under the pretence of liberty of conscience. Andrew Fuller asserted:

> There is a great diversity of sentiment in the world concerning morality, as well as doctrine: and, if it be an unscriptural imposition to agree to any articles whatsoever, it must [also] be to exclude any one for immorality, or even to admonish him on that account; for it might be alleged that he only thinks for himself, and acts accordingly. Nor would it stop here: almost every species of immorality has been defended and may be disguised, and thus, under the pretence of a right of private judgement, the church of God would become like the mother of harlots—"the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird."[10]

Similarly, B. H. Carroll argued:

> A church with a little creed is a church with a little life. The more divine doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness. The fewer its articles of faith, the fewer its bonds of union and compactness. The modern cry, "Less creed and more liberty," is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy. Definitive truth does not create heresy—it only exposes and corrects. Shut off the creed

9 Ibid., pp. 56–57.
10 Andrew Fuller, *Complete Works* (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1832), 5:221–22.

> and the Christian world would fill up with heresy unsuspected and uncorrected, but none the less deadly.[11]

Simply put, the objections to the legitimacy of creeds discussed in the preceding pages are groundless. Confessions are a lawful means of the church discharging its task as 'the pillar and ground of the truth.'

B. The uses of confessions

1. A confession is a useful means for the public affirmation and defence of truth

The church is to 'hold fast the form of sound words' (2 Timothy 1:13), to 'contend earnestly for the faith which was once delivered to the saints' (Jude 3), and to 'stand fast with one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel' (Philippians 1:27). In the fulfilment of this task, a confession is a useful tool for discriminating truth from error and for presenting in a small compass the central doctrines of the Bible in their integrity and due proportions.

First, credal formulation is part of the public teaching task of the church. A confession of faith is a public definition to those outside of our congregations of the central issues of our faith, a testimony to the world of the faith which we hold in distinction from others.

Second, a confession of faith is a helpful instrument in the public instruction of the congregation. A confession is a body of divinity in small compass which can be used to give our people a broad exposure to truth, as well as a hedge against error. It greatly facilitates the promotion of Christian knowledge and a discriminating faith[12] among the people of God and among others who attend upon

11 B. H. Carroll, *Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews*, in *An Interpretation of the English Bible* (1948, reprint ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 140.

12 John Murray observed: "In many circles today there is the tendency to depreciate, if not deplore, the finesse of theological definition which the Confession exemplifies. This is an attitude to be deprecated. A growing faith grounded in the perfection and finality of Scripture requires increasing particularity and cannot consist with the generalities that make room for error." *Collected Writings*, 1:317.

the public ministry of our churches, as well as being a useful aid to the people of God in the instruction of their children. Moreover, a confession of faith serves as a framework within which our people can knowledgeably receive the preaching of the Word, as well as one which alerts them to novelty and error, wherever they encounter it.

2. A confession serves as a public standard of fellowship and discipline

The Bible envisages the local church not as a union of those who have agreed to differ, but as a body marked by peace and by unity. The church is to 'keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3). Its members are to be 'of one accord', i.e., one in heart, soul, spirit, mind and voice (Romans 15:5–6; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 1:27; 2:2). A confession aids in the protection of a church's unity and in the preservation of its peace. It serves as a basis of ecclesiastical fellowship among those so nearly agreed as to be able to walk and labour together in harmony. It draws together those who hold a common faith and binds them together in one communion.

Jesus said, 'Every ... house divided against itself cannot stand' (Matthew 12:25). Can Calvinists, Arminians, Pelagians and Unitarians pray, labour, fellowship, and worship together peacefully and profitably, while each maintains and promotes his own notions of truth? Who will lead in worship or preach? Can those who believe Jesus to be God pray with those who regard such worship to be idolatry? Can those who profess to be justified by faith in Christ alone commune with those who believe otherwise? Can they sit together at the same sacramental table? Can those who believe in verbal and plenary inspiration share the pulpit with those who deny that doctrine? The only way that those who differ on essential matters can live together in harmony is to call a moratorium on truth; otherwise, they will indeed 'make the house of God a miserable Babel.'[13]

As noted earlier, all churches have a creed, either written or understood by its members. And every wise man, before joining, will desire to know what that creed is. He has a right to know what the

13 Miller, p. 10.

church believes and the church has a right to know what he believes. Now, to have an unpublished creed as a test of fellowship is disorderly, if not dishonest. Each man is left to discover the creed of the church for himself. And the church itself has no easy way to discern if those who apply for membership are in harmony with the common faith of its members, since the essentials of their common faith are nowhere particularized. A published confession greatly facilitates the evaluation of the doctrinal position of the church by a prospective member, and vice versa.

A published confession of faith also provides a concise doctrinal standard for use in church discipline. We are to 'mark them which cause the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them' (Romans 16:17). We are to cut off those who trouble the peace of the church by false doctrine: 'a man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject' (Titus 3:10). In order to fulfil its role in guarding the purity of its membership, the church must have a doctrinal standard, and that standard must be published openly, for men have a right to know by what particulars they will be judged. To require the church to exercise discipline against doctrinal error without a published confession of faith is to require it to make bricks without straw.

Nothing short of a confession of faith will satisfy the legitimate claims of a church and its members on one another. As James Bannerman observed, 'It is the duty of the church ... by some formal and public declaration of its own faith, to give assurance to its members of the soundness of its profession, and to receive assurance of theirs.'[14] A church without a confession of faith may as well advertise that it is prepared to be a harbour for every kind of damning heresy and to be the soil for any who are given to growing the crop of novelty. A church without a confession of faith has the theological and ecclesiastical equivalent of AIDS, with no immunity against the infectious winds of false doctrine.

14 James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (reprint ed., London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 1:296.

And what is true of life within the local church is also true of fellowship between local churches. What church, which values the preservation of its own doctrinal purity, as well as its own peace and unity, could safely have fellowship with another body, knowing nothing of its stand on matters of truth and error? With no defined faith or polity, such a non-confessional church might be a source of pollution instead of edification. Under such circumstances, we could not open our pulpits or encourage fellowship among the congregations with a clear conscience.[15]

Before we leave the subject of creeds as standards of fellowship and discipline, a word needs to be said lest some readers conclude that I am saying that every member must have advanced views of Bible doctrine in order to gain and to maintain membership in a confessional church. Note the observation of Andrew Fuller:

> If a religious community agrees to specify some leading principles which they consider as derived from the Word of God, and judge the belief of them to be necessary in order to any person's becoming or continuing a member with them, it does not follow that those principles should be equally understood, or that all their brethren must have the same degree of knowledge, nor yet that they should understand and believe nothing else. The powers and capacities of different persons are various; one may comprehend more of the same truth than another, and have his views more enlarged by an exceedingly great variety of kindred ideas; and yet the substance of their belief may still be the same. The object of articles [of faith] is to keep at a distance, not those who are weak in the faith, but such as are its avowed enemies.[16]

3. A creed serves as a concise standard by which to evaluate ministers of the Word

The minister of the Word is to be a 'faithful man' (2 Timothy 2:2), 'holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught … able by sound

15 Where we discover that there is not absolute agreement between our confessions, at least we are able to fellowship with our eyes wide open to those perspectives which divide us.

16 Fuller, *Complete Works*, 5:222.

doctrine … to exhort' (Titus 1:9). We are to be on guard against false prophets and apostles. We are to 'try the spirits, whether they are of God' (1 John 4:1). We are not to receive an unfaithful man into our homes or to extend to him a brotherly greeting, lest we become partakers in his evil works (2 John 10).

We cannot obey these admonitions simply by receiving the confession that a man believes the Bible. We must know what he believes the Bible teaches on the great issues. A confession of faith makes it relatively simple for the church to enquire about a man's doctrinal soundness over the broad field of biblical truth. Without a confession of faith the church's evaluation of its ministers is haphazard and shallow at best; and the church will be in great danger of laying hands on novices and heretics, all because it does not measure candidates for the ministry by a broad and deep standard.

And what is true in the church's recognition of its ministers is doubly true when recognizing professors set aside to train men for the ministry. One cannot overestimate the damage done to the churches by carelessness in placing men in theological chairs and in giving them the opportunity to shape the malleable minds and souls of young ministerial candidates.

4. Confessions contribute to a sense of historical continuity

How do we know that we and our people are not a historical anomaly, that we are not the only ones in history who have believed this way? Our confessions tie us to a precious heritage of faith received from the past and are a legacy by which we may pass on to our children the faith of their fathers. This, of course, is no minor issue. A sense of historical continuity greatly contributes to the stability of a church and to the personal spiritual well-being of its members.

C. Concluding observations

1. Modern Christianity is awash in a flood of doctrinal relativity. Satan and his forces love the imprecision and ambiguity which are rampant in our day. Spurgeon observed, 'The arch-enemy of truth has invited us

to level our walls and take away our fenced cities.'[17] One wonders what Spurgeon would say, were he alive today and could see how far the downgrade has gone.

Those of us who love these old standards have the duty of earnestly contending for the faith once delivered to the saints. We should not surrender our confessions without a fight. As Spurgeon said, speaking of the importance of confessions, 'Weapons which are offensive to our enemies should never be allowed to rust.'[18] The great reformed confessions were hammered out on the anvil of conflict for the faith and they have flown as banners wherever the battle for truth has raged. Where men have abandoned these statements of biblical religion, where latitudinarian opinions have reigned, the cause of God and truth has suffered greatly.

An unwillingness to define with precision the faith that it professes to believe is a symptom that something is desperately wrong with a church and its leadership. It is impossible for such a church to function as "the pillar and ground of the truth", for it is unwilling to define or defend the truth which it professes to hold. The reality of the current situation is that it is not so much the confessions as the churches that are on trial in our day.

2. Periodically it may be necessary to revise the great confessions of faith. We should not, however, revise them at every whim or with every change of theological fashion. These documents were not the productions of haste and they should not be revised in haste. Nevertheless, our confessions are not inherently sacrosanct or beyond revision and improvement; and, of course, church history did not stop in the seventeenth century. We are faced with errors today which the framers of the great confessions were not faced with and which they did not explicitly address in the confessions. Thus revision may be judged to be necessary, but it is a task to be undertaken with extreme caution.

17 Quoted by William Cathcart, "Creeds, Advantageous," in *The Baptist Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), p. 294.

18 Ibid.

If in our day we engage in the revision of our confessions, we must be determined to go against the spirit of much of modern confessional construction. Modern doctrinal statements are constructed for a different purpose than the old confessions.

Machen observed in his day: 'The historic creeds were exclusive of error; they were intended to exclude error; they were intended to set forth the biblical teaching in sharp contrast with what was opposed to the biblical teaching, in order that the purity of the church might be preserved. These modern statements, on the contrary, are inclusive of error. They are designed to make room in the church for just as many people and for just as many types of thought as possible.'[19]

3. Alongside of our appreciation for the great reformed confessions, we must remember that each generation must ground its faith in the Bible. People's faith must not be rooted only in an allegiance to the confession. In our churches we must seek to make followers of Christ, not just Baptists, or Presbyterians, or reformed. The confession must not become simply a tradition held without personal conviction rooted in the Word of God. As Professor Murray observed, 'When any generation is content to rely upon its theological heritage and refuses to explore for itself the riches of divine revelation, then declension is already under way and heterodoxy will be the lot of the succeeding generation.'[20]

4. The question of honesty comes into view when we address the issue of confessions of faith. Both for churches and for individuals, subscription to a confession is to be an act marked by moral integrity and truthfulness. Who would dispute the premise that a church should be faithful to its published standards or that a man should be what he says that he is? Yet sadly many churches have departed from their confession while still claiming adherence to the old standards. And many ministers claim allegiance to their church's confession, when

19 J. G. Machen, "Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," Banner of Truth (November 1970).

20 Quoted by Allan Harman, "The Place and Significance of Reformed Confessions Today," *The Banner of Truth* 112 (January 1973): 28.

in truth they object to (or have serious mental reservations about) particular articles of faith.

When a church departs from the old paths, if it will not return, let it publicly disavow its confession. While it may grieve us to see such defection from truth, and though the enemies of truth may seize the opportunity to slander and rail, surely it is better and more honest than for the church to continue in hypocrisy.

And what is true of corporate life is also true of personal honesty. Samuel Miller argued that subscribing to a creed is a solemn transaction 'which ought to be entered upon with much deep deliberation and humble prayer; and in which, if a man be bound to be sincere in anything, he is bound to be honest to his God, honest to himself, and honest to the Church which he joins.'[21] Miller goes on to say, 'For myself, I know of no transaction, in which insincerity is more justly chargeable with the dreadful sin of "lying to the Holy Ghost", than in this.'[22]

In closing I must appeal to pastors. Most of us affirmed adherence to a confession before hands were laid on us. Brethren, we are under solemn obligation before God to walk in the unity of faith in the congregations in which we labour. If we cannot do this honestly, if our views change, we should withdraw and find a group to which we can join ourselves without duplicity. If we are unwilling to do this, we are not blameless and without reproach; and, therefore, we are disqualified for the ministry.

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21 Miller, p. 98.
22 Ibid.

1.

OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

1. The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith and obedience,[1] although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable;[2] yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation.[3] Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times and in divers manners to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church;[4] and afterward 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 Scriptures to be most necessary,[5] those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.[6]

1. Isaiah 8:20; Luke 16:29; Ephesians 2:20; 2 Timothy 3:15–17
2. Psalm 19:1–3; Romans 1:19–21, 32; 2:12a, 14–15
3. Psalm 19:1–3 with vv. 7–11; Romans 1:19–21, 2:12a, 14–15 with 1:16–17; and 3:21
4. Hebrews 1:1–2a

5. Proverbs 22:19–21; Luke 1:1–4; 2 Peter 1:12–15; 3:1; Deuteronomy 17:18ff; 31:9ff; 31:19ff; 1 Corinthians 15:1; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–2,15; 3:17; Romans 1:8–15; Galatians 4:20; 6:11; 1 Timothy 3:14ff; Revelation 1:9,19; 2:1, etc.; Romans 15:4; 2 Peter 1:19–21

6. Hebrews 1:1–2a; Acts 1:21–22; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:7–8; Ephesians 2:20

2. 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: [There follow the names of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New.] All of which are given by the inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.[1]

1. 2 Timothy 3:16 with 1 Timothy 5:17–18; 2 Peter 3:16

3. The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon or rule of the Scripture, and, therefore, are of no authority to the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved or made use of than other human writings.[1]

1. Luke 24:27, 44; Romans 3:2

4. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church,[1] but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the Author thereof; therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.[2]

1. Luke 16:27–31; Galatians 1:8–9; Ephesians 2:20

2. 2 Timothy 3:15; Romans 1:2; 3:2; Acts 2:16; 4:25; Matthew 13:35; Romans 9:17; Galatians 3:8; Romans 15:4;1 Corinthians 10:11; Matthew 22:32; Luke 16:17; Matthew 22:41; John 10:35; Galatians 3:16; Acts 1:16; 2:24ff.; 13:34–35; John 19:34–36; 19:24; Luke 22:37; Matthew 26:54; John 13:18; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19–21; Matthew 5:17–18; 4:1–11

5. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church of God to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scriptures;[1] and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, and 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, and many other incomparable excellencies and entire

perfections thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God;[2] 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.[3]

1. 2 Timothy 3:14–15

2. Jeremiah 23:28–29; Luke 16:27–31; John 6:63; 1 Peter 1:23–25; Hebrews 4:12–13; Deuteronomy 31:11–13; John 20:31; Galatians 1:8–9; Mark 16:15–16

3. Matthew 16:17; 1 Corinthians 2:14ff; John 3:3; 1 Corinthians 2:4–5; 1 Thessalonians 1:5–6; 1 John 2:20–21, with v.27

6. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men.[1]

Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word,[2] and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.[3]

1. 2 Timothy 3:15–17; Deuteronomy 4:2; Acts 20:20, 27; Psalms 19:7; 119:6, 9, 104, 128

2. John 6:45; 1 Corinthians 2:9–14

3. 1 Corinthians 14:26, 40

7. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves,[1] nor alike clear unto all;[2] yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them.[3]

1. 2 Peter 3:16
2. 2 Timothy 3:15–17
3. 2 Timothy 3:14–17; Psalms 19:7–8; 119:105; 2 Peter 1:19; Proverbs 6:22–23; Deuteronomy 30:11–14

8. The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old),[1] and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic;[2] so as in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them.[3] But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have a right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded in the fear of God to read and search them[4], therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar [i.e. common] language of every nation unto which they come,[5] that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner, and through patience and comfort of the Scriptures may have hope.[6]

1. Romans 3:2
2. Matthew 5:18
3. Isaiah 8:20; Acts 15:15; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; John 10:34–36
4. Deuteronomy 17:18–20; Proverbs 2:1–5; 8:34; John 5:39, 46
5. 1 Corinthians 14:6, 9, 11, 12, 24, 28
6. Romans 15:4; Colossians 3:16

9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched by other places that speak more clearly.[1]

1. Isaiah 8:20; John 10:34–36; Acts 15:15–16

10. The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient

writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered, our faith is finally resolved.[1]

1. Matthew 22:29, 31–32; Acts 28:23–25; Ephesians 2:20

Outline of the chapter[I]

Para 1

I. Its necessity (or indispensability)
  A. The sphere of its indispensability: 'all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience'
  B. The basis for its indispensability
    1. Because of the insufficiency of general revelation
      What general revelation does do
      What general revelation cannot do
    2. Because of the inscripturation of special revelation
      The background to inscripturation: redemptive revelation
      The description of inscripturation
        (a) Its period
        (b) Its purposes
        (c) Its extent
      The impact of inscripturation

Paras 2–3

II. Its identity
  A. Defined positively or inclusively—'all the books of the Old and New Testaments' (para 2)
  B. Defined negatively or exclusively—not the Apocrypha (para 3)

Paras 4–5

III. Its authority

1 Note the helpful (and in several respects different) outline of B. B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. VI (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931, reprinted Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 191, 192.

A. In itself (or the fact of its divine authority) (para 4)
B. With us (or the authentication of its divine authority), (para 5)
1. The nature of the evidence
The external evidence of the testimony of the church
The internal evidence of the excellencies of Scripture
2. The efficacy of the evidence ('from the inward work of the Holy Spirit …')

Para 6

IV. Its sufficiency
A. The statement of its sufficiency
1. The scope of its sufficiency
2. The mode of its sufficiency
3. The implications of its sufficiency
B. The qualifications of its sufficiency
1. As to the illumination of the Spirit
2. As to sanctified common sense

Para 7

V. Its clarity
A. Its qualification
B. Its articulation

Para 8

VI. Its availability
A. The fact of its availability: its preservation
B. The necessity of its availability: its translation
1. The need for its translation
2. The warrant for its translation
3. The extent of its translation
4. The purposes of its translation

Paras 9, 10

VII. Its finality
A. For scriptural interpretation in particular (para 9)
B. For religious questions in general (para 10)

Throughout these studies in the Confession we will need repeatedly to remind ourselves that its assertions were forged in the fire of historical controversies. This is particularly true with chapter 1. Each of its seven major assertions (articulated in the outline above) contradict a corresponding Roman Catholic dogma. Further, in two instances at least (paras 1 and 6) the radical Anabaptist claims to direct revelation and the gift of prophecy are denied. These historical considerations do not, however, mean that the Confession is outdated. Rather, its thoughtful and earnest responses to the errors it confronted in its day enlighten basic issues of the faith to this day. Keeping such historical considerations in mind will serve to keep us from misunderstanding the Confession's assertions.

It is impossible to exhaust the wealth of insight contained in the ten paragraphs of chapter 1. We shall simply seek to elaborate briefly the scriptural basis for the major attributes of Scripture associated with the Reformation tradition: its necessity, its authority, its sufficiency and its clarity. Note that there are only a few, minor differences[2] between the 1689 and Westminster Confessions. The authors of the 1689 Confession did not differ from the Reformation tradition on the doctrine of Scripture.

I. The necessity of Scripture

A. The ground of this necessity

The Confession reminds us that the necessity of the Scriptures is rooted in the necessity of redemptive revelation itself. The 'light of nature' (etc.) is 'not sufficient to give that knowledge … which is necessary unto salvation'. Hence redemptive revelation is necessary for salvation.

The absolute necessity of redemptive revelation for salvation both qualifies and requires the necessity of the Scriptures. Men have

2 They are in paragraphs 1, 6, and 10. The last is derived from the Savoy Declaration. An examination of these variations will show that they are intended only to clarify and not to alter the meaning of the Westminster Confession.

been saved without the Scriptures, but not without redemptive revelation. This means that one cannot speak without qualification of the necessity of the Scriptures. They are not absolutely necessary like redemptive revelation. This is clear from the Confession. The language used is comparative: 'better', 'more sure'. At the same time, the absolute necessity of redemptive revelation requires the (qualified and derivative) necessity of the Scriptures. The Confession reminds us that the redemptive revelation is for a redemptive purpose. Men must come into contact with it for it to accomplish its end. As the necessary means to this necessary end the Scriptures are themselves necessary. 2 Timothy 3:15 states, for instance, that the wisdom which leads to salvation is given via the sacred writings.

B. The presupposition of this necessity

The assertion that inscripturation is the necessary means for bringing men into contact with redemptive revelation presupposes something that the Confession makes explicit. It presupposes that 'Those former ways of God's revealing his will [are] now ceased.' If the Christ were still among us or his inspired apostles still walked the earth, then Scriptures would not be so necessary. It was in fact the insistence of some that God's former ways of revealing himself had not ceased which elicited the Reformation insistence on the necessity of Scripture. Both the Catholics, with their infallible pope and church, and some of the radical Reformers, with their claim to present revelations from the Spirit, denied or downgraded the necessity of the Scriptures. Hebrews 1:1–2 contain many contrasts between the two ways in which God spoke, but there is at least one point of continuity. Both are completed. This observation is confirmed by the fact that inspired apostles, the only inspired representatives of the Son of God, no longer walk the earth (Acts 1:21–22; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:7–8). This is not the place to enter into an exhaustive treatment of the claims of the charismatic movement. It must be observed, however, that claims to continuing revelation conflict with clear and fundamental statements of the Confession and the Reformed and Puritan Christianity which it epitomizes.

C. The reasons for this necessity

The first of the purposes or reasons for the necessity of Scripture is the most crucial.

1. Preservation

The preservation of redemptive revelation brings us back to its redemptive purpose. The salvation of men depends on their being in possession of a trustworthy record of redemptive revelation. The Confession says that 'the truth which is necessary unto salvation' was committed unto writing 'for the better preserving of the truth', with the further end of being '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'.

Thus it was for the preservation of truth from the corruption of the flesh—human weakness—and the malice of Satan and the world—human wickedness—that God gave us the Scriptures. We have indications of this purpose in the Scriptures themselves. Certainty about the exact content of the divine revelation was the purpose of the Scriptures. Writing was necessary for certainty because of the weakness (Luke 1:1–4; 2 Peter 1:12–15; 3:1; Deuteronomy 17:18–20; 31:9–13, 19–21) and wickedness (1 Corinthians 15:1; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–2, 15; 3:17) of a fallen world.

2. Publication

The Confession also mentions 'the better … propagating of the truth'. Inspired apostles even when they were alive could not be present everywhere at once. Hence, they wrote letters for the better publication of the truth they taught (Romans 1:8–15; Galatians 4:20; 6:11; 1 Timothy 3:14–15; Revelation 1:9, 19; 2:1, etc.).

3. Selection

It is well to collate here a third purpose of inscripturation which is not mentioned in the Confession. Klooster notes, "One observes that inscripturation served the purpose of the Holy Spirit in selecting from the abundant original special revelation just that which served God's purpose in inscripturation. Inscripturation provided an

inspired selection ...."[3] (note John 20:30–31; 21:25; Colossians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 5:9–10.

The Confession might seem to contradict this when it says that God was pleased to commit the redemptive revelation 'wholly unto writing'. The clarity of the biblical evidence is such that the authors certainly could not have intended to teach that all redemptive revelation was committed to writing. It is not that everything once revealed is written, but that everything *now* revealed is written. The redemptive revelation contained in the Bible is an accurate and sufficient epitome of the whole of redemptive revelation.

D. The implication of this necessity

The necessity of the Scriptures implies a further special act of God in relation to the Scriptures. If God's sovereign purpose is to save men via the redemptive revelation he has given, and if this redemptive revelation must be inscripturated to be preserved in a fallen world, then it may also be assumed that this same sovereign redemptive purpose will ensure that these Scriptures, 'being immediately inspired of God', will also be 'by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages' (para. 8). By the strictest necessity the redemptive revelation once inscripturated will be guarded from corruption by the special providence of God.

To those who understand this, it comes as no surprise that an actual examination of the history of the text of the Bible and the study of textual criticism reveals that the text of the Bible is unquestionably the best preserved of all the classical works. Nor is it surprising that no single truth of the message of Scripture hangs in the balance of textual-critical studies. Nor yet is it surprising to discover that the science of textual criticism fairly and believingly used can resolve the vast majority of textual difficulties with a high degree of certainty.

3 Fred H. Klooster, *Introduction To Systematic Theology* (unpublished class notes) p. 96.

II. Its authority

The development of thought in paragraphs 4 and 5 utilizes the classic theological distinction between the authority of the Word in itself (*quoad se*) and its authority with us (*quoad nos*). This theological distinction is based on the difference between two questions which may be asked about the authority of the Bible. 'Why is the Bible authoritative?' and 'How do we know that the Bible is the Word of God and, thus, authoritative?'

While, as we shall see, these two questions and their answers are intimately related, they are logically distinct. While paragraph 4 says nothing about our confidence in the Bible, but only speaks impersonally of the authority of the Bible in itself, paragraph 5 has for its repeated emphasis our personal recognition of the authority of the Bible: 'We may be moved and induced ... to a high and reverent esteem ... our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth ... is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.' Paragraph 4 is objective in emphasis, while paragraph 5 is subjective. In expounding the truths asserted in these two paragraphs, the outline presented above will be used.

A. The fact of its divine authority (para. 4)

The divine authority of the Bible means its absolute authority, its verbal, plenary inspiration. Verbal, plenary inspiration is the teaching that the words of the Bible—all of the words of the Bible—are the products of a direct, supernatural influence of the Spirit on the men who were his organs or instruments. It is completely inerrant. This is, as will be argued below, the proper implication of the Confession.

As we consider the evidence for the absolute, divine authority of Scripture, it is important to begin by noting that the Bible never adversely criticizes itself. The Bible nowhere asserts of another statement in the Bible that it is in error. This is so self-evident that it needs no defense. We shall examine first the evidence for the authority of the Old Testament. Two classes of evidence for its authority may be enumerated: the witness of the Old Testament to the Old Testament

and the witness of the New Testament to the Old Testament. The witness of the New Testament to the Old Testament makes most clear the authority of the Old Testament as an organic whole. The argument for the authority of the Bible begins, therefore, with its doctrine of the authority of the Old Testament found in the New Testament.

1. The Old Testament is sacred (2 Timothy 3:15) and holy (Romans 1:2). Like the temple (note the relation of both words to the temple) the Old Testament is peculiarly associated with God. The Old Testament writings are God's writings.

2. The Old Testament writings are the oracles of God (Romans 3:2; Acts 7:38; Hebrews 5:12). As Warfield has shown in detail,[4] the word translated 'oracle', universally designates a divine utterance. Romans 3:2 refers to the written embodiment of these oracles, as their being 'entrusted' to Israel indicates.

3. God is the ultimate, determinative speaker and author of the Old Testament (Acts 2:16–17; 4:24–25; Matthew 13:35).

4. For this reason the phrases, 'God says,' and 'Scripture says' are equivalent. In Romans 9:17 and Galatians 3:8, what God said in the Old Testament is attributed to Scripture, while in Matthew 19:4–5, what Scripture said in the Old Testament is attributed to God. This holy confusion can only be explained on the supposition that Scripture is viewed as God's very speaking.[5]

5. Since God is the true author of the Scriptures, they can be and are written with the distant future in mind (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11). Note the implication of the plenary inspiration of the Old Testament in Romans 15:4.

6. Since God is the author of Scripture it is not only invested with plenary authority, it is also authoritative in detail. Arguments are built on the very form of a single word (Matthew 22:32; Luke 16:17; Matthew 22:41–6; John 10:35; Galatians 3:16).

4 B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 335f.

5 B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration*, p. 283.

7. Since Scripture is divine, it is, so to speak, the transcript of God's divine decree. A divine necessity demands its fulfillment (Acts 1:16; 2:24–36; Acts 13:34–35; John 19:34–36, 24; Luke 22:37; Matthew 26:54; John 13:18).

8. Perhaps the five classic passages which enunciate the divine authority of the Old Testament are 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19–21; Matthew 5:17–18; John 10:34–36; Matthew 4:1–11. They assert that the Old Testament as an organic whole and in detail is God-breathed, the product of direct, divine origination and determination, permanent and unbreakable in its every assertion, and as written is perfectly authoritative.

This survey of the evidence for the divine authority of the Old Testament as a whole and in detail reminds us of the words of Warfield:

> The effort to explain away the Bible's witness to its plenary inspiration reminds one of a man standing safely in his laboratory and elaborately expounding—possibly with the aid of diagrams and mathematical formulae—how every stone in an avalanche has a defined pathway and may easily be dodged by one of some presence of mind. We may fancy such an elaborate trifler's triumph as he would analyze the avalanche into its constituent stones, and demonstrate of stone after stone that its pathway is definite, limited, and may easily be avoided. But avalanches, unfortunately, do not come upon us, stone by stone, one at a time, courteously leaving us opportunity to withdraw from the pathway of destruction. Just so we may explain away a text or two which teach plenary inspiration, to our own closet satisfaction, dealing with them each without reference to its relation to the others: but these texts of ours, again, unfortunately do not come upon us in this artificial isolation; neither are they few in number. There are scores, hundreds, of them: and they come bursting upon us in one solid mass. Explain them away? We should have to explain away the whole New Testament.[6]

The argument for the authority of the New Testament is an inference from the New Testament's doctrine of the authority of

6 B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration*, p. 65, 66.

the Old Testament Scriptures. We need simply to establish that in principle the New Testament possesses the same (God-breathed) authority as the Old.[7] John Murray's comments on this point are compelling.

> The organic unity of both Testaments is the presupposition of the appeal to the authority of the Old Testament and of allusion to it in which the New Testament abounds. This fact of organic unity bears very directly upon the question of the inspiration of the New Testament. For if, as we have found, the authoritative witness of the New Testament bears out the unbreakable and inerrant character of the Old, how could that which forms an organic unit with the Old be of an entirely different character as regards the nature of its inspiration? When the implications of the organic unity are fully appreciated, it becomes impossible to believe that the divinity of the New Testament can be on a lower plane than that of the Old. Surely then, if the Old Testament, according to the testimony that in this matter has the greatest relevance or authority, is inerrant, the New Testament must also be.[8]

The presupposition and primary ground for the extension of the authority of the Old Testament to the New Testament is the specific relationship of organic unity which exists between them. The prophetic character of the Old Testament called for a New Testament. The New Testament proclaims itself to be that fulfillment. In the organic unfolding or redemptive history it must therefore exist on at least the same plane as the Old. This fact, demands that an equal authority and inspiration be attributed to the writings of the New Testament. The classic passages which teach the organic unity of the Old and New Testaments are Hebrews 1:1–2 and 2 Corinthians 3:10–11. Specific passages which teach the equal authority of the New Testament are those texts which teach the equal authority of the personal authorities of the New Covenant (Romans 16:25–26; 2 Peter

7 For excellent treatments of the authority of the New Testament Scriptures note the chapter by John Murray in *The Infallible Word*, "The Attestation of Scripture," (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 33–42, and also Abraham Kuyper's *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), pp. 460–473.

8 *The Infallible Word*, p. 34.

1:16–21; 1 Corinthians 14:37; 15:3–11; 2 Peter 3:1–2; John 2:22) and those which teach the equal authority of the written authorities of the New Covenant (2 Peter 3:16; 1 Timothy 5:18).

All the objections brought against the divine authority and inerrancy of the Bible cannot be treated here. The objection against this doctrine based on the humanity of the Bible does, however, deserve treatment. The objection is that the Bible was written by men. Men are free and errant. The Bible must, therefore, contain error.

That the Bible was written by men and is thus both a divine and human book cannot and must not be denied. Two considerations, however, manifest the falsity of the conclusion drawn from this fact by this objection. The first is the parallel with the doctrine of the person of Christ. The humanity of Christ does not mitigate or negate his full deity, with all its implications. So also the humanity of the Bible does not mean that it is errant. Jesus was a true man without being errant. So the Bible is a human book without being errant or any less divine. The second is the reformed doctrine of organic inspiration. This view denies any mechanical or dictation view of inspiration, in which the humanity of the human writer is suspended. It teaches the full humanity of the Bible, i.e., that the human writers' own personalities and freedom were fully operational. It also teaches the complete and detailed divinity of the Bible, i.e., it is precisely God speaking without human distortion. God made these men's mouths—through general providence and special grace—creating the precise instrument desired. Organic inspiration assumes the reformed and biblical view that the same activity can be and is both divinely ordained and the product of free, human agency.

Thus, the Bible can be the product of human beings writing and acting freely, while at the same time it is divinely inspired and inerrant.

The implication is that those who reject reformed views of divine sovereignty and yet understand the pervasive humanity of the Bible must logically reject the complete inerrancy of the Bible. This has in fact occurred in a recent well-known evangelical theologian. Though at one time a defender of biblical authority, this theologian adopted

Arminian views. Consequently, in a recent book on the Bible, he has denied the unlimited inerrancy of the Bible.[9]

B. The authentication of its divine authority (para. 5)

Paragraph 5 was directed against Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholicism affirms that the church is able to give an infallible attestation of the Bible. Any view which invests the church with infallible authority must be unacceptable to Protestants, but the Reformers were faced with a dilemma. If they rejected the opposite extreme, the radical Anabaptists and their claims to direct revelation, in what way could they authenticate the Bible? Their dilemma drove them to the Bible and the articulation of a penetrating insight into its authentication. While they recognized that the testimony of the church had a certain value, it was the divine excellencies of Scripture itself applied by the Holy Spirit to the heart which were the genuine and effective authentication of the Scripture. They taught, therefore, the self-authentication of the Scriptures.

The reformed view of the self-authentication (or *autopistia*) of the Scriptures can only properly be understood as consisting in a trilogy of Reformed doctrines. Furthermore, a deep appreciation of the cogency of the biblical evidence for the reformed solution is only obtained by viewing this trilogy of doctrines together.

1. The self-authenticating character of general revelation

Perhaps no one anywhere has more trenchantly stated the significance of the self-authenticating character of that natural revelation made to all men in general through creation than Cornelius Van Til where he said, "The most depraved of men cannot wholly escape the voice of God. Their greatest wickedness is meaningless except upon the assumption that they have sinned against the authority of God. Thoughts and deeds of utmost perversity are themselves revelational, that is, in their very abnormality. The natural man accuses or else excuses himself only because his own utterly depraved consciousness continues to point back to the original natural state of affairs. The

9 See the review of Clark H. Pinnock's *Scripture Principle* by Edward Donnelly, *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Issue 277 (October, 1986), pp. 27, 28.

prodigal son can never forget the father's voice. It is the albatross for ever about his neck."[10]

According to the biblical view of natural revelation man is always immediately confronted with divine revelation. God in his revelation is ceaselessly authenticating himself to man. The creature can never escape the Creator. Natural or general revelation is self-authenticating because it is the revelation of the Creator to the creature made in his image.

The biblical evidence may be summarized briefly here. Psalm 19 asserts that creation has a voice. It was created by the Word of God and now it speaks a word to men. With its voice it declares loudly, clearly, abundantly, ceaselessly and universally the glory of the living God. Romans 1:18–32 reflects on this psalm. It goes on to assert that such revelation leaves men without excuse because it actually imparts to them a certain knowledge of God. By it that which is known about God is made evident in them and to them. His eternal power and divine nature are clearly seen and understood by men. Thus the apostle can assert that men in a certain sense know God, know the law of God and know the ordinance of God that those who break his laws must die. Though they suppress the truth, they do possess the truth. This view of things is clearly corroborated by the rest of Scripture which steadfastly refuses to utilize rational argumentation to prove the existence of God. Even in Acts 17, where Paul faces complete pagans, the existence and attributes of God are rather asserted, assumed and declared than proved or argued. When Paul cites heathen poets in corroboration of his testimony, it is clear that he assumes that even those devoid of the light of redemptive revelation possess a certain suppressed knowledge of God that comes to distorted expression in their systematic thought.

Let it be clear what the force of the testimony of Scripture is. It is not that men may know God; nor that they potentially know God and will come to know him if they will use their reason aright. It is not that men by natural revelation have a certain vague notion of some

10 *The Infallible Word*, Cornelius Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," pp.274, 275.

undefined deity. It is rather that men are immediately confronted with a clear and unavoidable revelation of the true and living God.

The evidence for the self-authentication of Scripture is never given its proper weight divorced from this backdrop.[11] If general revelation is self-authenticating, how much more must special revelation as it is inscripturated in the Bible, be self-authenticating. For the fact is that the great difference between general and special revelation is that special revelation has a far more direct and personal character than general revelation. In general revelation creation speaks to us of God. In special revelation God himself approaches us directly and personally speaking to us in words. If then the comparatively indirect and impersonal general revelation authenticated itself to men as divine revelation, how much more will direct and personal speaking by God to men in special revelation constrain recognition by its self-authentication.[12]

2. The self-authenticating character of the Scriptures

Here we come to the true heart of the Reformed solution to the problem of the authentication of the Bible. The Bible everywhere asserts that the Scriptures are never to be viewed as a dead letter, but as the living Word of God (Jeremiah 23:28–29; Luke 16:27–31;[13] John 6:63; 1 Peter 1:23–25; Hebrews 4:12–13). As the living Word of

11 John Murray has seen this relationship. "If the heavens declare the glory of God and therefore bear witness to their divine Creator, the Scripture as God's handiwork must also bear the imprints of his authorship." *The Infallible Word*, p.46.

12 This view has been clearly asserted by stalwarts of the Reformed faith. Calvin frequently asserted just this in the opening pages of the *Institutes*. Note 1:3:1,2,3; 1:4:1,2; 1:5:1,2,4, 11,15; 1:6:1,2. The statement of 1:5:4 is typical: "They perceive how wonderfully God works within them, and experience teaches them what a variety of blessings they receive from his liberality. They are constrained to know, whether willingly or not, that these are proofs of his divinity: yet they suppress this knowledge in their hearts." John Owen has made the point even more clear from a technical point of view. He says after citing Romans 1:19 and 2:14,15: "And thus the mind doth assent unto the principles of God's being and authority, antecedently unto any actual exercise of the discursive faculty or reason, or other testimony whatever." *The Works of John Owen*, vol. IV (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965) p. 84.

13 Note John Owen's comment on Luke 16:27–31, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. IV (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965) pp.75,76.

God, the Scriptures in and of themselves demand to be believed and oblige all who hear them to believe. Without reasoned dissertations or external arguments being added to them, the Scriptures are sufficient to warrant the confidence in their truthfulness which is required for saving faith (Deuteronomy 31:11–13; John 20:31; Galatians 1:8, 9; Mark 16:15–16). If one does not clearly state that the Scriptures are sufficient to oblige belief in and of themselves, one seriously undermines the doctrine of the sufficiency of the Scriptures.

Calvin makes this point very plainly:

> But with regard to the question, "How shall we be persuaded of its divine original, unless we have recourse to the decree of the church?" This is just as if anyone should enquire, "How shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter?" For the Scripture exhibits as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black things do of their colour, or sweet and bitter things of their taste.[14]

3. The Testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Scriptures

It is now possible to see the true significance of the reformed doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is not a subjectivistic or mystical appeal to an inner light. It has its objective basis in the self-authentication of Scripture. Calvin saw this clearly:

> Let it be considered then as an undeniable truth that they who have been inwardly taught by the Spirit feel an entire acquiescence in the Scripture, and that it is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence, and ought not to be made the subject of demonstration and arguments from reason; but it obtains the credit which it deserves with us by the testimony of the Spirit.[15]

The question may arise, however, 'If the Scriptures are self-authenticating what is the need of the additional testimony of the

14 John Calvin, *The Institutes*, 1:7:2. Note also 1:7:5. John Owen follows Calvin in this doctrine, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. IV (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965) pp. 73–82, 115. Jonathan Edwards echoes their thoughts, *The Collected Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. II (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p.16.

15 John Calvin, *The Institutes*, 1:7:5.

Holy Spirit?' Further, if they are self-authenticating, what of the unbelief and denial by which they are met by so many? This brings us to discuss the necessity of the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

The cause or necessity of the testimony is in one word, sin. Human depravity perverts human intellectual endeavour. It causes men to suppress the truth and so spiritually blinds them to the light of divine revelation (Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:17–21; 2 Corinthians 4:3–4). The testimony of the Holy Spirit, therefore, has for its nature the removal of that evil ethical disposition which blinds man to the light of divine revelation. The testimony is thus an ethical operation. It does not consist in some new revelation in addition to that which is contained in the Scriptures.

The reality of the testimony of the Spirit may be demonstrated by two lines of biblical argument. First, the Bible teaches that if man is to think aright, he must be right ethically (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10; 1:7; 15:33; John 3:19–21; 7:16–17; 2 Timothy 2:25; 3:7; John 10:26–27). Faith, fear, doing God's will, repentance—all these are produced in sinners by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The passages supporting this assertion are well known and need not be cited here. Second, there are a number of passages which directly assert that it is the Spirit who enables us to see and understand spiritual truth (Matthew 16:17; 1 Corinthians 2:14–16.; John 3:3–8; 1 Corinthians 2:4–5; 1 Thessalonians 1:5–6; 1 John 2:20–21, 27).[16] These passages make clear that it is the Spirit who creates faith in the Scriptures.

It is important to note in conclusion that the whole effort to discover some external attestation of the Bible is misguided, whether that attestation is sought in an infallible church or in an historical expert. This is so for several reasons. Firstly, since God has spoken and the Bible is itself the living Word of God, the highest possible attestation is the Bible's own witness to itself. Secondly, to suppose that a subsequent divine revelation is necessary to attest the biblical revelation would require that this subsequent divine verification itself

16 Note John Murray's exposition of many of these passages in *The Infallible Word*, pp. 47–54.

be attested by a third revelation and so *ad infinitum*. If the Bible as God's voice from heaven does not attest itself, no amount of voices from heaven will ever be sufficient to attest it.[17] Thirdly, the entity to which appeal is made to attest the Bible tends to replace the Bible as one's practical authority. In other words, that which is appealed to in order to attest the Bible tends to become the real canon of those who appeal to it, to the detriment of the Bible. This observation is certainly confirmed by Roman Catholicism's appeal to ecclesiastical authority. The history of that movement shows that its appeal to the church to attest the authority of the Bible eroded the Bible's authority. This is so because in each such appeal the Bible ceases to be the absolute norm. In each the Bible is to be attested via an appeal to a higher norm or canon. Thus each of the attempted answers is virtually a denial of the absolute, divine authority of the Bible. Hence, while it is helpful to distinguish logically between the authority of the Bible with us and its authority in itself, it must always be remembered that in both cases it derives its authority from a single cause. 'It is the Word of God' (para. 4).

III. The sufficiency of the Scriptures (para. 6)

The Confession's doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture must first be defined. Note first of all what is not asserted in this definition—what the sufficiency of Scripture does not mean. Clearly, the sufficiency of Scripture does not mean, in the first place, that all we need to know about the matters mentioned in the Confession are stated explicitly, in Scripture or, we may add, literally. The phrase, 'or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture', is equivalent to the phrase in the Westminster Confession it is intended to clarify: 'or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture'. What may be by sound logic deduced from Scripture, that is to say, what is necessarily contained in it, has the authority of Scripture itself.

17 Stonehouse has well said, "The only concrete form in which that attestation can come, if it is not to be derived from another objective revelation from the Lord of heaven, must be nothing other than the voice of Scripture itself." *The Infallible Word*, p. 105.

It is evident, secondly, from the Confession's definition that the sufficiency of Scripture does not imply its 'omni-sufficiency'. Sufficiency is always to be defined with reference to some purpose. The first question in this matter must always be: 'Sufficient for what?' While the issue of the exact nature of the purpose for which the Scriptures are sufficient will be enlarged upon below, it ought to be clear that the sufficiency of Scripture is very carefully stated. The Bible is not all-sufficient for every conceivable purpose. The Scriptures, for instance, are not sufficient as a textbook in math, biology or Spanish. The sufficiency of the Scriptures does not mean they all are we need for the purpose of learning geometry or algebra. The Westminster divines confessed their faith in the sufficiency, but not the omni-sufficiency of Scripture.

What, then, is the purpose for which the Scriptures are sufficient? The sufficiency of the Scriptures is nothing more nor less than their sufficiency to achieve the purposes of redemptive revelation. Surely this is clear from the qualifying statement of the Confession: 'all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life'.

It is often said that the Scriptures are sufficient for showing us the way of salvation. This is liable to be misunderstood today because of the minimizing mentality abroad which is intent on reducing the way of salvation to its barest elements. It surely must be clear that such an understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture is a deviation from the historic Reformation understanding articulated in the Westminster Confession. 'All things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life' is far more than the 'Four Spiritual Laws'. It is nothing less than sufficiency for the redemption of man both individually and corporately in the whole ethical and religious sphere of life that is asserted.

We must reflect on the breadth of this assertion. When we remember that the area of religion and ethics is the supreme sphere of human life and knowledge, we become increasingly aware of the magnitude and value of this doctrine of the sufficiency of the Scriptures. Though it is not an assertion of the omni-sufficiency of the Scriptures, it is saying that they are sufficient to be the basis and

starting point for every other scientific endeavour. The Scriptures are not a textbook of biology, but they sufficiently provide those ethical and religious perspectives basic to any proper science of biology. The Bible is not sufficient for all that we do, but it does speak to all we do sufficiently as to the glory of God, the way of salvation and the path of duty.

We may take by way of illustration a typical Tuesday in the life of Chris College, a university student majoring in engineering. His Bible is insufficient as a textbook for his classes in calculus, biology and French; but it does show him the path of duty throughout such a typical Tuesday. It teaches him to pray and read his Bible in the morning, to be diligent and discerning in his studies, and to avert his eyes when the college temptress walks through the library when he is studying. It does provide him an infallible record of creation and redemptive history. This record does set certain boundaries or limits which guide him in his study of biology and history. Any theory of history or biology which contradicts the historical statements of the Bible he will properly reject. Thus, while the ethico-religious sphere of human knowledge is distinct from other spheres, it is basic to them all.

One further point must be underscored with reference to the sufficiency of the Scriptures. It is, historically speaking, the most basic. The sufficiency of the Bible means its sole sufficiency. It is sufficient to achieve the purposes of redemptive revelation without supplementation by new revelations (claimed by some Anabaptists and others) or traditions of men (like those extra-biblical traditions claimed by the Roman Catholic church).

It is this and no other view of the sufficiency of the Scriptures which must now be demonstrated.

The redemptive revelation originally given by God must surely be regarded as sufficient for the purposes for which it was given. To think anything else is to impugn the wisdom of God. To this theological argument must be added the specific data of Scripture which clearly asserts that in the inscripturated redemptive revelation we possess a sufficient revelation of the will of God.

Not surprisingly, the classic assertion of the sufficiency of the Scriptures is found in a passage crucial to other attributes of the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15–17). There are three assertions in this passage important with reference to the question under consideration. There is the assertion of verse 15, 'the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation …' Here is the explicit assertion that the Scriptures contain all the wisdom necessary for our salvation. There is the assertion of verse 16, 'All Scripture … is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.' The term translated 'profitable' in the NASV means useful, beneficial, advantageous. The fourfold usefulness of the Scriptures enumerated here by the apostle surely implies that the Scriptures are a sufficient handbook for young Pastor Timothy. He faced a bewildering array of needs in Ephesus which demanded in turn many kinds of ministry. He must often have asked himself, 'How am I to meet these multiple challenges?' Paul's assertion is to the effect that the Scriptures are able to equip Timothy for every ministry he is called upon to give. There is the assertion of verse 17, 'that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work'. This assures us that the Scriptures are not merely moderately useful to the man of God, but thoroughly sufficient for all his needs as a man of God.

A further remark is necessary to round out this treatment of the classic passage on the subject of the sufficiency of the Scriptures. First, it must be admitted that Paul's primary emphasis is that the Scriptures are sufficient for 'the man of God.' As will be argued later under the discussion of the clarity of the Scriptures, this phrase is not a designation of all Christians, but peculiarly of the one charged with the proclamation of the Word of God. This fact does not impair the witness of this passage to the sufficiency of the Scriptures for Christians in general. It rather enhances it. Surely if the Scriptures are sufficient for the multifaceted duties of the man of God, they must be sufficient to show the ordinary Christian his path of duty. Further, the Pastoral Epistles abound with evidence that the ordinary Christian is sufficiently supplied to perform every good work (1 Timothy 5:10; 2 Timothy 2:21; Titus 1:16; 2:14; 3:1).

Many other texts of Scripture bear witness to the sufficiency of inscripturated redemptive revelation (Deuteronomy 4:2; Acts 20:20, 27; Psalms 19:7; 119:6, 9, 104, 128).

It is important at this point to issue several cautions so that false inferences are not drawn from the sufficiency of the Scriptures. This the Confession does. In the opinion of the writer these cautions are particularly necessary in our day of heightened individualism.

The sufficiency of Scripture does not negate the necessity of the individual's diligence. This doctrine is no excuse for mental laziness. The Confession (1:7) emphasizes the importance of the 'due use of the ordinary means' (Proverbs 2:4).

The sufficiency of Scripture does not negate the necessity of the Spirit's teaching. This doctrine is no excuse for intellectual pride. The Scriptures are not sufficient or clear to the one devoid of the Spirit. The Confession asserts, 'Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word …' (1:6; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:14).

The sufficiency of Scripture does not negate the necessity of common sense. Natural reason is assumed in those to whom the Scriptures are addressed. Such reason is, itself, the creation of the Word of God. The Confession assumes this when in 1:6 it acknowledges 'that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.'

IV. The clarity of Scripture (para. 7)

The definition of the Confession of Faith may be expounded by use of three simple assertions.

The Bible is clear. The arguments for the clarity of Scripture must first be stated. First, it may be argued that the clarity of Scripture is

part of its sufficiency (2 Timothy 3:16–17). It is ridiculous to say that the Scriptures are adequate to equip the man of God for every good work, if they are not clear enough for him to understand. Such writings would be sufficient for nothing at all. Second, the clarity of Scripture is presupposed in its ability to produce conviction (2 Timothy 3:14). The verb translated 'become convinced of' in the NASV means to feel confident, he convinced. It is clear from the connection with verse 15 that the Scriptures are the source of this conviction. The point is that one is never convinced of anything until it is clearly seen to be true.

Even truth will not produce conviction and confidence if it is presented obscurely. Since Scripture had produced not merely notions but convictions in Timothy, it must have been clear. Third, the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture is affirmed in many other places (Psalms 19:7–8; 119:105; 2 Peter 1:19; Proverbs 6:22–23; Deuteronomy 30:11–14).

The extent of the clarity of Scripture may also be treated here. The Confession speaks of this as 'those things necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation'. Again, this is not intended to limit the clarity of Scripture to a few simple gospel truths. Such a minimizing mentality was foreign to these theologians. Rather, the evidence cited above shows that the clarity of Scripture is not to be limited so severely. Those things necessary for salvation in the minds of Westminster theologians must surely have included at least the central duties of the Christian life and good works. Such duties make up the way (Matthew 7:13–14) which leads to life.

The Bible is not equally clear in all its parts. Certainly the classic passage relevant to this point is 2 Peter 3:16. Here Peter (who wrote a few things that are hard to understand himself) asserts that in Paul's writings there are things hard to understand. It must be noted that this assertion is carefully qualified by Peter. Only *some* things are hard to understand. Only the untaught and the unstable distort these things to their own destruction. Then Peter adds by way of further qualification that such people engage in this kind of distortion with reference to the rest of the Scriptures as well. This, of course, underscores the idea that the fault in such distortion does not lie in the obscurities of Paul's writings, but in the untaught and unstable. Clearly the presence of

such difficulties does not negate the practical sufficiency and clarity of the Word for its redemptive purpose.

The Bible is not equally clear to all. Again at this point 2 Timothy 3:15–17 illustrates this point. Verse 15 asserts that the Scriptures are clear enough to give to a child the wisdom that leads to salvation. This is the implication of Paul's statement that 'from an infant' (literally) Timothy had known the sacred writings that were able to give him the wisdom that leads to salvation. This is, of course, hyperbole. Infants know nothing about any writings, let alone the sacred writings. Paul means to say, however, that as soon as Timothy knew anything, he knew the Scriptures, and he knew them precisely as that body of writings which are able to make wise unto salvation even a child like Timothy. Verse 17 asserts that the Scriptures are clear enough to equip the man of God for every good work. There may be an intentional contrast between the child of verse 15 and the man of God in verse 17. At any rate it is instructive to observe what Paul mentions with regard to the man of God.

We are immediately confronted here with the question, 'Who is the man of God?' The evidence identifies the man of God not as any believer, but rather as one with an official position of ministry among the people of God. The man of God is the man entrusted with a special position of leadership in the church by God himself. It is the man among the people of God who is in some special way associated with God or identified with God. Three lines of thought converge to justify this conclusion.

1. There is the Old Testament usage. It is clear that in the Old Testament this designation was not used of all godly Israelites but reserved for those who led them.

2. There is the usage of 1 Timothy 6:11. It seems clear that in this entire context Paul is thinking of Timothy in his official ministerial capacity (1 Timothy 1:18; 5:17–25; 6:2,14, 17–18, 20).

3. There is the context of 2 Timothy 3:17. In the preceding verse Paul is definitely thinking of ministry. The Scriptures are profitable (as translated by the NIV) for teaching, rebuking, correction, and

training—different facets of ministry of Timothy and every true pastor. In the succeeding verses the emphasis continues to be upon the ministry (2 Timothy 4:1–5).

The man of God may not simply be equated with every true believer. Hence, it is right to see in 2 Timothy 3:15–17 a reflection by Paul on the idea that the Bible is not equally clear to all. It is clear enough to enlighten even a child as to the way of salvation. It is clear enough to enlighten the man of God with reference to the whole range of his duties.

The sufficiency and clarity of Scripture do not, therefore, negate the necessity of the church's ministry. This caution is most needed in our day. In the classic passage it is the clarity and sufficiency of the Scripture for the work of the pastor-teacher that is specifically emphasized. This fact alone ought to refute the smug independence from the ministry of the church often deduced in our day from the sufficiency of Scripture (see also Acts 8:30–31; 17:11; Ephesians 4:11–13). The following conclusions are warranted by these passages. These passages clearly underscore the sole and supreme authority of Scripture. There is no priestly authority invested in the ministry which makes pastors qualitatively different from other Christians. These passages also teach the practical necessity of the man of God in the life of the people of God. Though one cannot assert that the ministry of the church is absolutely crucial in the conversion of each individual, yet such ministry is often the means of conversion. More importantly, the pastor-teacher is crucial to the ongoing life of the church. One may speak of a general, practical necessity of the teaching ministry. Finally, these truths taken together clearly teach the complementary function of the Word of God and the man of God. The Scriptures do not permit us to despise or neglect either.

There are several practical implications. We must reject modern individualism. We need guides in the Scripture. We must maintain teachable, humble attitudes towards our instructors in the faith. We must receive their instruction and search the Scriptures. We must permit nothing unnecessarily to lessen our benefit from the public

ministry of the Word. It ought to be a priority for every Christian to put himself and his family under a faithful ministry of the Word.

Several practical conclusions of great significance follow from the perfection, that is to say, the sufficiency and clarity, of the Scriptures. The first is the centrality of the Scriptures in Christian guidance. The Scriptures provide the key or secret to the discovery of God's will for our lives. They are able to do this because they are a sufficient and clear guide to the entirety of God's preceptive will for us. The wisdom clearly and completely contained in the Scriptures enables us to order our lives in a wise and God-pleasing fashion. In the light of the Scriptures and their wisdom even such knotty decisions as those concerning college, vocation, and marriage are made clear. It is to the Scriptures, therefore, that we must point those in need of the divine guidance promised in those same Scriptures (Psalm 25).

The perfection of Scripture must also obliterate all cynicism or skepticism with respect to the meaning or the proper interpretation of the Scriptures. Even professing Christians will sometimes say, 'Great men of God have differed, so how can I expect to be certain of the meaning of Scripture at this point?' How often the objection is raised 'That's only your interpretation!' Such objections presuppose and imply the insufficiency and obscurity of the Scriptures. They are a denial of the perfection of Scripture. They are an assertion that when God spoke he muttered, stuttered, or stumbled. Such ideas are clearly rooted in rebellion against the God of Scripture. They are contradicted by the sufficiency and clarity the Bible ascribes to itself.

The perfection of the Scriptures means that the source of error in matters of faith and life is sin. This is not to say that every error is solely or equally caused by sin. It is to say that unfallen men would not be guilty of sins of ignorance with regard to what they believed or practiced. When the objection is raised 'that great men of God have differed,' the answer must be given that they were sinners none the less, and sinners with blind spots caused by their remaining sin.

The sufficiency and clarity of Scripture must be the presuppositions with which we confront every issue of faith and life. It is our duty and

our privilege to expect that our duty on any issue of faith and life will be sufficiently and clearly revealed in the Scripture. Any approach to the practical study of the Bible not rooted in such a perspective is improper and must tend to be ineffective because it grieves the Spirit who breathed out the Scriptures. Issues like the Christian Sabbath, Believer's baptism, and others—perplexing as they can sometimes appear—must not be regarded as insoluble. Since they are clearly matters of duty, we must regard the Scriptures as sufficient and clear enough to resolve them.

Does this chapter support the doctrine of the unlimited inerrancy of Scripture?

By the phrase, 'the unlimited inerrancy of Scripture', I intend the notion that the Scripture is without error in all that it affirms. This is affirmed as over against those professed evangelicals who have opted for a view of Scripture which has been described as 'infallibility rather than inerrancy' or 'limited inerrancy'. Such views have been espoused in order to allow for errors in the historical or scientific assertions of the Bible. It is difficult to deal patiently which such patently contradictory formulas as 'infallibility rather than inerrancy' or 'limited inerrancy'. Language has rarely been used so dishonesty. The following assumes a more straightforward use of human language.

An ingenuous reading of this chapter must lead to the conclusion that its authors would have supported unlimited inerrancy were they part of the modern debate. To begin with, they speak of the Scriptures being 'given by the inspiration of God', 'being of divine inspiration', and finally, of their 'being immediately inspired of God' (1:2, 3, 8). Further, in the most conservative fashion they have no doubt about the exclusive canonicity of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments (1:2, 3). Also in the most conservative fashion they simply assert that Scripture 'is the Word of God' (1:4). Yet more, they speak of 'the consent of all the parts', the 'incomparable excellencies and entire perfections', and 'the infallible truth' of the Scripture (1:5). Clearly, they could not have believed that the Scriptures contradicted themselves or that their historical or scientific assertions were not reliable. Yet again

in the most conservative fashion the Confession distinguishes between the 'immediately inspired' originals, which are the court of final appeal, and necessary, though human translations (1:8). Furthermore, in paragraphs 9 and 10 the Confession underlines the absolute finality and supremacy of Scripture. Scripture is 'the infallible rule' for deciding questions of interpretation and 'the supreme judge' for all other religious controversies. Such an understanding absolutely does not allow for calling into question the statements of Scripture on the basis of the dictums of modern science or historical research. Clearly, if given a choice between the statements of modern science or the assertions of the Bible, these authors would find in favour of the Bible every time. Such teaching is equivalent to unlimited inerrancy. Finally, if further evidence is needed, the reader may consult chapters 4:1–3, 19:1, and 22:7 of the Confession where, upon any fair reading of the text, a view of creation and Genesis 1–3 is assumed which today is everywhere associated with the strictest view of biblical inerrancy.

Clearly, there is no justification for the idea that either the London or the Westminster Confessions tolerate deviations from unlimited inerrancy. One further comment is, however, necessary. It is the purpose of creedal documents like the Confession to exclude error. Errors and heresies now exist which, however illegitimately, purport to hold the confessional position on Scripture and even adopt venerable theological language in which to express their erroneous teaching.[18] Subtle heretics can make their position appear plausible to the unwary. The unfolding of error in history and the progress of the church's understanding and ability to express truth in words does occasionally require that formulas once sufficient to exclude error be strengthened and clarified. May there not be a place for expanding the Confession at this point and including an explicit adoption of the position that the Bible is verbally and plenarily inspired and a pointed statement that the Bible is inerrant in all that it affirms?

18 Note especially the second question and answer of the Shorter Catechism where Neo-orthodoxy and those with similar leanings can very comfortably speak of "the word of God which is *contained* in the scriptures." Such terminology presented no problems when first adopted, but now makes any theologically aware person swallow hard.