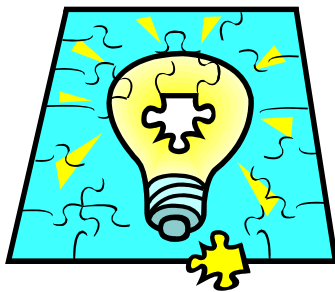




Insights  
on the  
Westminster Confession  
of Faith view of the Bible

by Andrew Young



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# NEGLECTED GOLD

For the rest of this term I want to do something different in my weekly e-mail messages. Rather than share insights from books, I want to explore with you part of the much-neglected Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF).

For those of you unfamiliar with the WCF, it is one of the great creeds of the Christian church produced by a group of scholarly church leaders in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It attempts to summarize what the Bible teaches on each of the major doctrines of the Christian faith. Since its completion in 1646 it has been widely used, especially in Presbyterian and Reformed churches throughout the world, as a summary of doctrine, a standard for discipline, and a basis for unity.

That appreciated, the question remains, “Why make it the subject of a series of insights in the year 2006?” Let me give you five reasons for doing so.

The first is that the WCF has been **a source of immense personal blessing**. Over the past eleven years I have taught a course on the WCF on four occasions. Each time I have done so I have been encouraged, inspired, strengthened and spiritually blessed. I enjoy teaching this course as much as any.

Secondly, in studying the WCF closely I have been impressed by **the wealth of truth and spiritual insight that it contains**. Its thirty-three chapters are crammed with statements full doctrinal and practical gold. Most people today find the language too compressed to read easily and don’t persevere past the first article or two. But it is worth doing so.

Thirdly, teaching the WCF has helped me see that **there are many doctrines in the Bible that Christians today don’t know very well**. Two years ago I did a simple exercise. I made a list of the major doctrines or ideas in the WCF (I counted 181), then made an

assessment as to how many of these were (i) *well known* by most Christians, (ii) *partly known* to most Christians, and (iii) *unknown* to most Christians. The results – as subjective and biased as they probably were – were nevertheless sobering. I concluded that less than 10% of the main doctrines of the faith were well known and commonly accepted by most Christians, approximately 50% were reasonably well known, and some 40% not known at all. If this is anywhere near correct, it highlights that there are many Christians who don’t know much about a lot of what the Bible teaches.

Flowing from this, fourthly, I believe **there is an urgent need today for Christians to be taught the doctrines of the faith**. What we believe shapes how we worship God and how we live our lives before him. The church cannot but suffer if its members don’t know what they believe.

Finally, and fifthly, I believe there is **a special need for church leaders to have a clear and firm grasp of the faith** (see Titus 1:9). They need it so they can become Christlike in character, and they need it so they can teach and protect those they serve. Leaders without clear convictions will spawn followers who don’t know what they should believe or how they should live. Blind leaders will lead blind followers into a pit (Matt. 15:14).

These reasons constrain me to do what I can to stir Christians – and especially Christian leaders – to get a clear and comprehensive grip on the faith they profess. The future of the church depends on it.

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# WHY IS THE BIBLE SO IMPORTANT?

*Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence manifest to such an extent the goodness, wisdom and power of God that men are left inexcusable, yet they are not sufficient to give the knowledge of God and His will, which is necessary for salvation. therefore it pleased the Lord, at various times and in different ways, to reveal Himself and to declare His will to His Church, and afterwards to commit all this to writing for the better preserving and propagating of the truth and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corrupt nature and the malice of Satan and the world, which make the Holy Scripture to be most necessary, the former ways of God's revealing His will to His people having ceased (WCF Chapter I:1)<sup>1</sup>*

There is such a wealth of teaching in the WCF that it is tempting to pick up each golden nugget and explore it in depth. But if we were to do that we would never get anywhere. Instead, I will content myself with the role of a guide, pointing out and highlighting what the Confession has to say on particular matters of doctrine. And this term, we will focus on what the WCF has to say on the doctrine of Scripture.

The first thing the WCF says about the Scriptures relates *to their necessity*. Why is the Bible so important? That's a question evangelical Christians are often asked. It's a question that all of us need to be able to answer clearly today – especially as biblical illiteracy increases.

The first thing the WCF tells us in this regard is that the Scriptures are necessary because **other means of knowing God are inadequate**. It indicates that there are other ways by which people can know about God. It mentions three in particular: “*the light of nature*,” (presumably referring to an innate knowledge of God within

<sup>1</sup> The text of the WCF used is that produced by the Westminster Fellowship of NZ (with permission).

the human heart), and the “*works of creation and providence*.” These three sources, it says, are sufficient to enable all people to know the “goodness, wisdom and power of God.” This is the point the Apostle Paul makes in Romans 1:18-23. Paul says that people have always been able to see enough of God’s “invisible qualities” in the world he has made to know that he exists, and that he is powerful and wise and good. And that knowledge leaves them “inexcusable.” No one can say they cannot know of the existence of God: it is obvious to everyone. When people say they don’t know whether there is a God, they are wilfully suppressing the obvious truth.

However, as compelling as these sources of revelation are, **they are not able to give us that knowledge of God and his will that is necessary for salvation**. It is one thing to learn from the world about us that there is a God. It is another to know that *we are alienated from him and under his wrath on account of our sin*. And it is another still to know *how we can be reconciled to God and enjoy him as our heavenly Father*. That understanding of God and his will requires something extra – something the WCF says that God has been “pleased” to give us by revealing himself and his will “at various times and in different ways.” These various revelations include the theophanies (personal appearances in humanly understandable forms) prophetic visions, dreams and words that occurred at times in history before the coming of Christ. But supremely, that revelation took place in the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the eternal Word of God who came among us. These things God was pleased to “commit... to writing for the better preservation and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church.”

This is what makes the Scriptures so important – especially given that the former ways of God revealing himself “have now ceased.” In simple terms, we need the Bible not so much to know that God exists, as to know how we, as sinful people, can be saved and live in a way that pleases him. That’s why we can’t afford to neglect it!

# WHAT IS THE TRUE BIBLE?

*Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament, which are these... All these books are inspired by God to be the standard for doctrine and practice.*

*The books commonly called the Apocrypha, not being inspired by God, are not a part of the canon of Scripture; and therefore they have no authority in the church of God, nor are they to be approved or made use of in a manner different from other human writings. (Chap. I:2-3)*

Given that the Bible is necessary, how do we know what the Bible is? Can we be sure that we have all of the “Holy Scriptures,” or the sacred writings containing God’s revelation of himself and his will?

Again, this is no academic question. Some will recall recent claims about a newly discovered Gospel of Judas. Scholars are saying that according to this document the Bible has it wrong about Jesus and Judas. Can we believe them? Can we be sure that the books we have in our Bible are the right ones, and that they are the only ones?

The men who produced the WCF were convinced that **the common Bible in use today is the complete record of God’s written word to man**. The Confession defines God’s special writings as those contained in what we commonly call “the Old and New Testaments,” and names these writings (books) to ensure that there is no uncertainty.

It goes on to speak of the *special quality and function* of these various books. It says that all of them are “inspired by God to be the standard for doctrine and practice.” It is this feature – inspiration by God – that is the distinctive mark of these holy writings. The WCF doesn’t tell us exactly what inspiration by God involves, nor does it tell us how it can be recognized in a specific writing. But it does insist that this is the distinguishing mark of the books to be accepted as the written word of God. And such books are to be understood as given to serve as a standard for doctrine and practice.

That must still be our position today. Why do we accept the Bible containing the Old and New Testaments as the written word of God? Because we believe God has inspired the 66 books that make up the Bible. While each has a human author(s), we understand those human authors were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” as they wrote (2 Peter 1:21), making their work nothing less than a “God-breathed” word. From the outset, the church recognized this quality about these writings. It wasn’t a church council, or an individual, who told the church which books were God’s written word. It was the Holy Spirit, bearing witness to his own word that did that. He confirmed in the hearts of his people the things he had written, enabling them to receive them and trust them when they encountered them.

The WCF goes further than identifying the true scriptures; **it specifically rejects the books of the Apocrypha**. The name “Apocrypha” is given to a collection of books found in many Roman Catholic editions of the Bible. These books were written in the period between the last of the biblical prophets (Malachi) and the coming of Jesus. Their authority has been disputed by sections of the church in course of history. The Westminster Assembly, however, was in no doubt as to their standing. It said that these books were not inspired, that they had no authority in the church, and that they were to be treated the same as other human writings.

The books of the Old and New Testament – the inspired writings emerging from God’s great covenant dealings with his people through Moses and Jesus – are all that belong to the written Scriptures. We need no others and should accept no others.

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# WHY SHOULD WE RESPECT THE BIBLE?

*The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, does not depend upon the testimony of any man or church but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author of it; and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God. (Chap. I:4)*

The Bible makes some pretty big demands of us. It also makes some amazing promises. It calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34). It assures us that if we believe in Jesus we shall never die, and that if we forsake home and family for Christ, we will receive abundantly more than this in this life, and then eternal life (John 11:25-6; Mark 10:29-31). Can we believe these things? Why should we obey it?

These questions relate to the subject of *authority*. One theologian defines authority as “the right to command belief and action.” That’s the issue we are dealing with here. What reason do we have for recognizing the Bible has authority – the right to command belief and action?

This is another live issue in our world today. Modern people – at least in our western culture – struggle with the matter of authority. They don’t like being told what to do and believe. They hate the thought they are not free to do as they please, and chafe against restraints that don’t suit them. When we come to them with a book that we say contains truths to be believed and obeyed, they naturally resent the intrusion upon their liberty. Why should we give any attention to that book, they ask? What right does it have to demand anything of us?

The WCF provides an answer to these questions. It does so in a negative way firstly by saying that **the Bible is not to be believed and obeyed just because some person or the church says so**. It is right, of course, that we should tell others about the Bible. We should love to speak of the way we have found its words so satisfying and life changing. It is right to say that we believe it to be a “lamp to our feet and a light to our path” (Ps. 119:105), and to encourage others to respect it as much as we do. But it is not right to insist that they listen to it simply because of what it means to us. We could be mistaken. Our personal convictions are not an adequate ground for its authority.

The same is true of the church. The church should hold the Bible in the highest regard. But it shouldn’t – as has been done in the past – use its authority over people to make them believe and do what the Bible says. The church is not “over the Bible” in that sense – it doesn’t have an immediate and higher authority over the hearts of people than does the Bible itself. Again, the church could be, and has been in many things in the past, mistaken in its views. It simply cannot urge people to respond to the Bible because it says so.

There is only one reason why people should respect and obey the Bible: **because it is God’s Word**. It’s authority rests on its authorship. We recognize that principle in the world of human writings, don’t we? When Tiger Woods writes a book on golf, golfers take note of what he says. That’s because Tiger Woods is an authority on golf. He deserves to be listened to because of who he is. In the same way – only to an infinitely greater degree – the Bible deserves to be listened to because God is its author. He is “truth itself” – the source and standard of all that is true and good – and consequently, his word is to be believed and obeyed.

That’s what gives Holy Scripture – or the Bible – its ultimate authority over men. It is God’s Word. And it is because of who he is that it is to be received, trusted and obeyed.

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## IS THE BIBLE GOD’S WORD?

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture; and the divine origin of the content, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the harmony of all parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full revelation it gives of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies and the entire perfection of it are arguments by which it abundantly gives evidence that it is the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Scripture is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, who witnesses by and with the Word in our hearts. (Chap. I:5)

If someone asked you to prove that the Bible is the Word of God, would you know how to respond? We need to be able to, especially as our culture becomes more biblically illiterate.

The WCF helps us at this point. It outlines three grounds for accepting the Bible as the Word of God. The first is what it calls **the testimony of the church**. This is the witness of the church to the special character of the Bible. Generations of Christians down through the centuries have found the Bible to be a source of wisdom, truth and comfort. They have found its principles for life true, they have died clinging to its promises, and above all, they have come into a living, personal relationship with God through its gospel. They have believed it to be the Word of God, and their confidence shouldn’t be dismissed lightly.

But secondly, there is a **quality about the contents of the Bible** that supports its claim to be the Word of God. The WCF points to several of these characteristics. It mentions the “divine origin of the content,” alluding to the fact that much of the Bible is the direct speech of God, and that all of it comes through writers inspired by God. It refers to “the efficacy of the doctrine,” – that is, the power of

its teaching to change lives – to the “majesty of the style, the harmony of all parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full revelation it gives of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies and the entire perfection of it” as arguments “by which it abundantly gives evidence that it is the Word of God.”

As convincing as these arguments may be, the writers of the Confession recognized that “our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Scripture” comes only through **the witness of the Holy Spirit by and with the Bible in the hearts of those who read it**. In the end, it is only the Spirit of God, the author of the Bible, who can give unshakeable certainty that the Bible is what it claims to be, the Word of God. He does so by working *by and with* that Word in our hearts. He doesn’t tell us directly that this is his word, but he works with and through it, giving it such force and power in our hearts, that we are led to believe that it is what it is – God’s Word and not merely the word of men.

It is impossible to describe this witness of the Spirit in detail. It is an assurance that the Holy Spirit puts in our hearts that cannot be explained in terms of arguments or reasons. It is not something that is *apart* from or *against* reason and argument – indeed it is given in connection with the arguments and truths of the Bible. But it is something more than mere intellectual certainty. It is a profound inner assurance given by the Holy Spirit himself.

Many, to be sure, will not be convinced that the Bible is God’s word simply by the three arguments above. We shouldn’t expect otherwise. In the end, it is only the Holy Spirit himself sovereignly bearing witness to his word who will convince people of its truth. While we must play our part in explaining why we believe the Bible to be God’s Word, in the end, God himself is the only one who can give the infallible certainty that the Bible is his book.

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## IS THE BIBLE ENOUGH? (1)

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation and for doctrine and practice, is either expressly mentioned in Scripture, or may by good and necessary inference be deduced from Scripture, to which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by so-called new revelations from the Spirit or by traditions from men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is necessary for the saving understanding of the things which are revealed in the Word, and 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 regulated by the light of the nature and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (Chap. I:6)

The Bible is a profoundly useful book. According to this section of the WCF, **it contains everything we need** to bring glory to God, to be saved from eternal death, to know the truth about God and man, and to live God-pleasing lives in the world. “The whole counsel of God” concerning these things, it says, is contained in the Scriptures.

By that it doesn't mean that the Bible tells us *everything we might like to know!* It doesn't tell us, for instance, our personal destiny, the man or woman we are to marry, the details of events that will take place when Jesus returns, or just how the impenitent will suffer in hell after the judgment.

Furthermore, it doesn't claim that the Bible tells us *all that can be known* – especially in the fields of science and economics and the arts. The Bible has very little to say on these subjects, even though God has always known all about them. He could have told us much more than he has, but he has chosen not to do so. Instead, in giving us the Bible, God has made sure that we have a complete revelation of *all that we need to know* about the things that matter most – bringing him glory, the salvation of our souls, and knowing and doing what pleases him.

In saying that, the WCF points out that **not everything God wants us to know is stated simply and directly** – that is, his counsel for us is not all “expressly mentioned.” Much of it is, but much of it is to be derived by “*good and necessary inference*” from what is written. For example, God has not “expressly” stated that we shouldn't use modern medical technology to abort unwanted children. Nevertheless, we can easily (and necessarily) deduce from what is written in the Bible that it is wrong to do so. There are enough clearly stated principles to allow us (indeed, compel us) to come to practical conclusions for life in our modern world.

Given this is true, the WCF goes on to say that we must **guard against adding anything to what is written in the Bible**. If the Scriptures contain all that God wants us to know – “the *whole counsel of God*” – about the things necessary for us, then there is no need to add anything to them. Indeed, it is wrong to do so.

Yet many earnest Christians have done just that – either inadvertently or intentionally. One way they have done so is by claiming “*new revelations from the Spirit*.” This tendency is common in our own day. Many Christians pay more attention to the voice of God in their inner spirit than they do to his revealed word in the Bible. In practice, if not in theory, they add another source of revelation to that already given in the Bible.

Then there are others who want to impose *time-tested traditions* on people. These practices, they insist, have developed under the hand of God, have been evidently blessed by God, and consequently carry the authority of God. So they should still be followed. (*To be continued*).

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## IS THE BIBLE ENOUGH? (2)

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is necessary for the saving understanding of the things which are revealed in the Word, and 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 regulated by the light of the nature and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (Chap. I:6)

We noted last week that the Bible contains all God wants us to know to bring him glory, to be saved from our sin, and to live lives that please him. And because it contains everything we need to know, it is wrong to add anything to it either in the way of fresh revelations of the Spirit or the traditions of men.

That's not to say, however, that there is no place for the Holy Spirit in making God's mind known to us, or for the practices and "traditions" developed by men. The WCF insists that there is a proper place for both.

The Holy Spirit, it says, **illuminates the Word of God so that it can be understood in a saving way**. The Bible itself tells us that the natural man (the person who doesn't have the Spirit living within them) cannot understand the things that God has revealed (1 Cor. 2:14-15). They seem foolishness to such a person. They can be understood as words and ideas, but they don't register or make sense, and certainly don't compel a response. That's because they are "spiritually discerned" – only understood with the help of the Holy Spirit. He alone can help us see the significance of the things God reveals and make them effective in our lives.

In doing this, however, the Holy Spirit doesn't add to what is in the written scriptures. In a very real sense it is proper to speak of the Bible as "the Spirit's own book." He inspired its writers, and he uses it as the means of his work in the lives of people. That's what makes

it such a mistake to bypass his word, or to imagine that he needs to add to it. We are to seek the Spirit's help in and through his word rather than apart from it.

Just as there is a role for the Holy Spirit in revealing the will of God, so too there is a place for the traditions and practices of men in the life of the Church. This is true particularly in **regulating aspects of its worship and government**. There are "some circumstances" relating to these things, the WCF says, which are "common to human actions and societies," and which consequently are to be "regulated according to the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word."

It's not difficult to think of examples. The Bible doesn't tell us, for instance, how often to worship, at what time to worship, the precise order of worship, the length of the sermon in worship, and so on. Nor does it tell us when and if and for how long the elders of the church should meet, how frequently they should visit the people, and how they should communicate their decisions to the congregation. These things are to be "regulated by the light of nature and Christian prudence." Yet acting in this way, church leaders must take care that all they do is in harmony with "the general rules of the Word of God," and not confuse their "Christian prudence" with the authority of Scripture.

We end up, then, with a comprehensive and balanced view of the "sufficiency of Scripture." The Bible tells us all we need to know to be saved and live in ways that please God. Yet, there is still need for the Spirit to make the God's Word effective, and a place for human regulations for structuring the practical affairs of the Church's worship and government.

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## CAN I UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE?

All things in Scripture are not equally plain in themselves, nor equally clear to all; yet the things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and revealed in some portion of Scripture or another that not only the learned but also the unlearned, by the proper use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them. (Chap. I:7)

The Bible can seem a daunting book to new Christians – and to those older in the faith as well. Its bulk can put people off, and so too can its language and the events it relates. It is so foreign to our times that it's easy for the new Christian (and the lazy Christian) to say, "It's too hard for me. I will leave it to the professionals."

There have been times in the history of the church when "professionals" have exploited this lack of confidence. Church dignitaries and academic scholars have both, in their own ways and for their own reasons, argued that the Bible is such a difficult book that it can't be understood by the common people, and for that reason, shouldn't be put into their hands at all.

The Reformers and their successors, like the men who wrote the Westminster Confession of Faith, strongly resisted this attitude. They were aware that **the Bible is not always easy to understand, and not equally understandable to everyone**. They didn't deny that there were parts of the Bible that could only be properly known through careful research and familiar acquaintance with the language and customs of the biblical times. Nor did they close their eyes to the fact that some people were better able to understand the Bible than others. They knew that a trained thinker could follow the logic of Paul's arguments better than an uneducated mill worker, and that a scholar familiar with the Hebrew language could appreciate the parallelisms of Hebrew poetry better than an uneducated maid. They accepted that some people were able to mine the depths of the Bible better than others.

But what they did deny vehemently was that *only scholars* could learn and profit from the Bible. They insisted that "the things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation" were so clearly propounded somewhere or other in the Bible that even the simplest reader could gain a "sufficient understanding" of them. In other words, they held that **everyone could know what they needed to know for eternal life and gospel obedience**. They didn't need the services of a scholar for this, but they could learn what they needed to through the use of "ordinary means" – that is, by reading, hearing and prayerful meditation. They might not gain an *exhaustive* knowledge, but they would have a *sufficient* knowledge of the things that mattered most. And for that reason, the Reformers insisted that ordinary Christians not only *should* be allowed to read the Bible, but that they *must* read it.

Add to this what we saw in an earlier study, namely, our need for the Holy Spirit to give us true spiritual understanding of the Bible, and there is further reason for insisting that common Christians should have access to the Bible. The fact is that no one – not even the most brilliant scholar or schooled churchman – can understand the Bible in a saving way without God's help. That puts everyone on a level playing field. Scholars have the *capacity* for knowing and understanding much more of the Bible than other Christians do, and for that reason, have a valuable place in the life of the church. But the fact that they *may know* more doesn't mean they actually *do know* more of the Scriptures in a saving and spiritual sense. That depends on God's grace. And in that, they have no advantage over a child.

Indeed, the Bible itself tells us that God delights to reveal himself to "babes" rather than to the wise (Matt. 11:25-26; 1 Cor 1:20-31). That ensures that he gets the glory rather than men. It should warn us against every form of biblical elitism. The Bible is for all.

## ARE TRANSLATIONS OK?

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old) and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing of the New Testament was the language most generally known to the nations), being directly inspired by God, and by His extraordinary care and providence kept pure in all generations, are therefore authoritative, so that in all controversies of religion the church is to appeal to them as the decisive authority. But because these original languages are not known by all the people of God, who have a right to an a share in the Scriptures and are commanded, in reverence to God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the popular language of every nation to which they are brought, that, through the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner and through patience and comfort from the Scriptures may have hope. (Chap.I:8)

Bible translations are very much part of life for today's Christian. Most of us have a stack of different Bible versions on our shelves and think nothing of it. Our church leaders certainly don't hound us for having them either.

That hasn't always been the case however. For long periods, translations of the Bible were banned, hunted down, and publicly burnt. The reasons for this were varied – ranging from an over-inflated view of one particular translation to a determination to keep the Bible from the common people.

It was against this background that the writers of the WCF made their bold and helpful declaration about Bible translations printed above. The first thing they took care to preserve was **the uniqueness of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures**. These, they said, were the languages of the original inspired documents, and on that account, were to be regarded as authoritative, and to be decisive in all matters of controversy in the Church. They went further to say that God, in the providential care of his written word, had preserved and kept it pure in all generations. That is another way of saying that every generation has had access to the true Word of God.

But secondly, the framers of the WCF also insisted that it was **proper to translate the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures** into the “popular language of every nation to which they are brought.” They took this position for a number of reasons. The most basic was their conviction that while not everyone knows the original language of the Scriptures, everyone is entitled to, and indeed needs to have, access to the written word of God. It is the duty of all Christians, they held, out of reverence to God, to read and study the Scriptures. They need this if they are to “worship Him [God] in an acceptable manner,” and if they are, through “patience and comfort” derived from the Scriptures, to have hope. To deprive God's people of his Word is to starve them of their spiritual food and prevent them from knowing God and worshipping him as they should.

This has been – and still is – the basic rationale for translating the Scriptures. As long a new tribes and languages are being discovered, the need for Bible translation will continue. It remains an essential aspect of the task of taking the gospel of the kingdom to the nations.

But having said that, great care is needed in translating the Scriptures into the popular language of any people. The process of translation is one in which meaning is almost always added or lost. For that reason it is a task that calls for a spirit of godly reverence as well as linguistic skill. It also needs an awareness of the difference between translation and illumination. No amount of effort to render the original languages understandable can ever substitute for the Holy Spirit's role of making God's word effective.

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# HOW DO WE MAKE SENSE OF THE BIBLE?

*The infallible standard for the interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore when there is a question about the true and full meaning of any passage of Scripture (which passage has only one meaning, not many), it must be sought in and made known by passages that speak more clearly. (Chap. I:9)*

It's one thing to believe the Bible is the Word of God, and to have it in a language you can read. It is another altogether to read and interpret it correctly.

How can we know that we have understood it in the way God wants us to? Or are there – as some would suggest – multiple meanings of the Bible text suited to the individual needs (or perhaps the presuppositions, prejudices and inclinations) of each reader? These are age-old questions, questions the writers of the WCF addressed, howbeit briefly, in the article above.

One thing they made clear was that each passage of the Scripture **has but one meaning**, not many. In making this statement they were responding to a long tradition in the Church that held it was proper to see a range of meanings in a given text – including what might be called the literal (or historical), the typological, the moral and the allegorical. These various meanings were not simply shades of one another, but in many instances, quite distinct and unrelated to each other.

This, the writers of the Confession held, was incorrect. They believed that any passage of the Bible had but one meaning, a meaning to be discovered through a process of careful, Spirit-enabled historical, linguistic and theological interpretation. While that single meaning might have different *specific applications* to readers in different situations, its essence, all the same, remained constant.

But how can anyone be sure that they have the “true and full meaning” of any passage of Scripture? There is only one infallible (completely certain) standard by which to measure this, the Confession says – **Scripture itself**. If we want to know whether *our* meaning is *God's* intended meaning, we must first test it against what the Bible says elsewhere. Since God cannot contradict himself, we must bring our understanding of any passage to the Bible itself for testing. If it doesn't match, it can't be right.

But not only does the Bible provide the *ultimate standard* for testing our interpretation of its meaning, it also provides *resources for obtaining* that true meaning. Whenever we come to a passage that is inherently difficult and obscure, or to a word or phrase that we just can't fathom, we are to look for and seek to know its meaning in passages that are easier to understand. This is the basis of the well known adage, “Let Scripture interpret Scripture”, or “Scripture is its own interpreter.”

It's worth noting that this process is helpful not simply for determining the “true” meaning of a passage, but its “*fuller*” meaning as well. Some interpreters have claimed that Scripture has a fuller, spiritual meaning accessible only to the Church or to an enlightened few. Over against this, the writers of the Confession believed that it is only proper to speak of the “fuller” meaning of a passage in terms of the wider teaching of the Bible itself upon that passage (or at least, upon its theme). We are not to look for special spiritual insights that take us beyond what is written in the Bible, but to the Holy Spirit teaching us more completely what he has placed elsewhere in the Bible.

These simple principles are as relevant as ever. The Church today is stumbling at many points not necessarily because it doesn't believe in the Bible, but because it doesn't interpret it well.

## IS THE BIBLE THE LAST WORD?

The supreme Judge, by whom all controversies of religion are to be settled and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, teachings of men, and individual spirits are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be none other than the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. (Chap I:10)

The last thing the writers of the WCF say on the Scriptures relates to their final authority, or to their ability to act as a “supreme Judge” in situations that require decision. For centuries Christians were told that it was the Church (and especially the Pope) that had the right to act as the final judge in matters of faith and conduct. The Reformers rejected that claim and resurrected the idea that Scripture alone had this final authority.

The WCF helpfully teases out **different areas** in which the Bible is to act as the “supreme Judge.” The first of these is in the area of *controversies of religion* – that is disputes relating to the doctrines of the Christian faith and how they are to be practiced. Church history is littered with such disputes, and they still abound in the Church today. How are we to determine who is right and who is wrong? The Bible is the only final Judge.

Secondly, what are we to make of *the decrees of councils* – councils such as the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.), and of Chalcedon (451), and of Trent (1545-63)? For that matter, what are we to make of the writings of the Westminster Assembly (1643-48)? Understandably, the WCF doesn’t dismiss the value of such gatherings, but it does insist that the final authority by which their deliverances are to be weighed is the Scripture. The decrees of even the ablest and holiest of men cannot be taken as final; only the “sentence” of Scripture is to be treated as absolute and to be “rested” in

Thirdly, the Scripture is to take precedence over the *opinions of ancient writers* and the *teachings of men*. There has always been a tendency in the Church to over-estimate men – either current teachers, or those of the past. There was a time when the writings of the “ancients” (the Church Fathers) were venerated to such a degree that they were treated as authoritative. Today that’s not a common problem. But we have our own “gurus” all the same – popular teachers whose word is treated as final on a particular subject. While we should never denigrate gifted Bible teachers, at the same time, we cannot look to any individual person as having the final word on any issue. That role is reserved for the Bible.

Finally, the WCF warns us against giving supreme authority to *individual spirits*. This most likely refers to claims of special revelation, a feature by no means confined to our own day. Without commenting on the credibility of such claims at this point (it does so elsewhere), the WCF insists that they cannot be allowed final authority in the Church. It is in the testimony of the Scriptures that we are to consult.

It might be asked **why this exclusive right** belongs to the Bible. The answer lies in the fact that it is *none other than the Holy Spirit who is speaking* in the Bible. We are to look to the Bible to judge controversies, human decrees and teachings and the like, because it is God himself who speaks in it. While we can (and should) appreciate the insights of men as they meet in councils and as they write and teach, we cannot equate their wisdom with that of God. If there is ever a dispute or an issue of conscience that affects us, we are to look to the Holy Spirit speaking in the Bible (and the Bible alone) for final sentence, not men. This doesn’t encourage us to dismiss the teachers and rulers God gives the Church, but it does free us from their tyranny.

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