

# “How Firm a Foundation” and the Westminster Confession of Faith

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## **Abstract**

The Protestant and Reformed view of Scripture over against the Roman Catholic view is that Scripture attests its own authority. This view does not, however, mean that there are no arguments available that point to Scripture’s self-attesting authority. The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms in chapter 1, section 4, that Scripture is its own foundation, then in the following section gives a helpful list of arguments that provide useful indications of Scripture’s divine authority. These arguments are reviewed and explained in the following presentation.

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## **I. “How Firm a Foundation” and Scripture**

**M**ost people know the hymn “How Firm a Foundation.” Even though its author remains anonymous, it has had significant influence in the church since it appeared in the latter part of the eighteenth century. (It was originally sung, at least in the United States, to the tune of *Adeste Fideles*.)

In its opening stanza, the hymn moves directly to the character of Scripture: “How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in *his excellent Word*.” Then, considering the excellent Word that is our only

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foundation, the writer asks, “What more can he say than to you he has said, *to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*”<sup>1</sup> What we call the *sufficiency* of Scripture reminds us that in the church, all that is needed is what God has said. There is no need in our personal lives or in the church to add anything to Scripture; we have all that we need if we desire to do and to be what the Lord expects of his children.

However, this hymn has much more in view than an affirmation of the doctrine of Scripture’s sufficiency, vitally important as that is. It continues by applying the notion of the sufficiency of God’s Word in order to reach the very recesses of our hearts. Notice *how* the hymn expounds on what it means for Scripture to be sufficient. Its sufficiency means that we flee to Jesus for refuge in the firm foundation of his Word:

Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed;  
For, I am your God, and will still give you aid;  
I’ll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,  
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

When through the deep waters I call you to go,  
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;  
For I will be with you your troubles to bless,  
And sanctify to you your deepest distress.

When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all sufficient, shall be your supply;  
The flame shall not hurt you; I only design  
Your dross to consume, and your gold to refine.

The hymn moves from an *affirmation* of the firm foundation in the excellent Word to the *practice* of that affirmation. The sufficiency of Scripture, in other words, is meant to provide the Lord’s people with strength and comfort through times of trial and testing: *because* the Lord is sufficient for you, his Word is sufficient for you.

The hymn takes its cue from Isaiah 41 and 43, where the prophet says,

Fear not, for I am with you;  
be not dismayed, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isa 41:10)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Emphasis in the quotes in the lecture has been added by the author.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references are from the ESV.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you. (Isa 43:2)

The *sufficiency* of Scripture does not mean only that the Lord has *said* all that he needs to *say* until Christ comes again, but also that in and through the sufficiency of the Word, as our firm foundation, we are graciously enabled to endure the deep waters, the rivers of sorrow. Those things will not overwhelm, but sanctify by and through his grace. We can walk through the fiery trials, and the flame will not hurt us, because of the all-sufficiency of his Word and his grace. Those fires will consume our dross and refine us into the image of the beloved Son.

## II. *Westminster Confession of Faith: Background*

The deep and rich reality of the Word of God, recognized through the deep waters and fiery trials of the Reformation, attests the *glorious riches* of the Word. We tremble at the thought of leaving, dismissing, or, even worse, denying the all-sufficient Word the Lord gave to his church. The supreme character of that Word is portrayed by one of the most exquisite paragraphs ever written about it—a paragraph not inspired or infallible, but so close to it that it deserves our full attention. According to B. B. Warfield, it is a paragraph “of almost unsurpassed nobility of both thought and phrase.”<sup>3</sup>

Warfield is referring to section 5 of chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), which is vitally important for us. It takes its cue from the previous section, which articulates concisely and wonderfully what it means to confess that the Word of God is our ultimate authority.

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God. (WCF 1.4)

Firstly, in section 4, the Confession focuses on the *authority* of Holy Scripture, specifically *from what or whom* Holy Scripture *derives* its authority. This was a pressing issue during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It has been a pressing issue since Satan first asked the question, “Has God really said...?” (cf. Gen 3:1), and it remains so today. Since the Confession

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<sup>3</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Westminster Doctrine of the Holy Scripture,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 2:566.

wanted the church to recognize its proper place, it began with the negative. The first thing Protestants affirm is that “the authority of Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man, or church” (WCF 1.4).

This was important during the time of the Reformation, because the issue of authority was of paramount importance for obvious doctrinal reasons, and its importance had deep and abiding personal and ecclesial consequences. Francis Turretin, for example, put it this way:

Still it is certain that the more common opinion of the Romanists is that of *uncertainty*, especially among the Jesuits, who teach that no one without a special revelation can be sure (with the certainty of divine faith) that his own sins have been pardoned because they perpetually suppose that this certainty rests upon one’s own infirmity and indisposition. Hence they conclude that the certainty of justification is only conjectural, opinionable, deceitful (i.e., *really no certainty at all*).<sup>4</sup>

If the authority of Scripture is derived from the church, the certainty of justification is uncertain. Think of that! To the question as to whether or not we can stand guiltless before God, the answer is, “it is impossible to know such a thing. The best we have available is conjecture.” No wonder that a commitment to such a church produces unremitting guilt and sadness. There is no possible way to know our standing before a holy God. We can guess at it, but our guess is only as good as our current disposition and as solid as our last sin. How can we be certain that the Lord will sustain us through the deep waters and refine us through the fire when we can never be certain if he has accepted us?

However, it is not just in Roman Catholicism that uncertainty is promoted. One prominent evangelical, who considered his Christian commitment to be informed by Thomas Aquinas, argues that we must first *demonstrate* that the Bible is the Word of God if we are going to trust what it says.<sup>5</sup> If this is the case, then the truth of the matter is that the authority of Scripture depends on us; it cannot be trusted until *we* adequately demonstrate it. That is just another version of the Roman Catholic view, with an individualistic twist. It means that Scripture’s authority is dependent on man or church. Once that is conceded, confidence in Scripture’s supremacy is inevitably lost.

This is what the Confession has in view in section 4. The *practical* and *pastoral* significance is that if my standing before God depends on me to

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<sup>4</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), 2:616 (15.17.1).

<sup>5</sup> Norman Geisler, “Reviews,” *Christian Apologetics Journal* 11.2 (Fall 2013): 173.

demonstrate it, or on others to confirm it, then confidence in my ability to stand before a holy God is only as strong as my confidence in myself or other people. No matter how confident we might appear at times, deep down we know that we are sinful and stained to the deepest recesses of our hearts. To look to ourselves as the foundation of confidence will produce nothing but anxiety and sadness. We cannot bear a load like that. To think that any person, or institution, is our “firm foundation” is to stand on quicksand; we will, inevitably, sink into the morass of human sin.

Secondly, the positive focus that section 4 sets out is that the authority of Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, depends “*wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.*”

How can we know that we can stand guiltless before God, that we will be sustained and refined in the trials of God’s good providences? Not because the church says so, or because we possess the proper evidences to trust what is in Scripture. We can know because God has told us so, as Turretin affirms: “Thus Scripture, which is the first principle in the supernatural order, is known by itself and has no need of arguments *derived from without* to prove and make itself known to us.”<sup>6</sup>

In Christ, we can be certain of our present and future righteousness before the throne of God above. Again, to quote Turretin, the Scriptures “have a theological and infallible certainty, *which cannot possibly* deceive the true believer illuminated by the Spirit of God.”<sup>7</sup> Because Scripture is the very Word of God, it comes to us with all of the certainty and veracity of God, who is truth himself. If there is one thing we know about God, it is that God is not to be doubted. He does not offer promises tentatively and hesitantly or tell us that *maybe* we will be accepted if we are in Christ. Our acceptance is inextricably linked to the acceptance of the only begotten Son and his work of redemption in our behalf.

As glorious as this statement is in section 4, we might imagine that it has a possible problem attached to it. Some fear that when Scripture is affirmed in this way we will have no sure way of knowing that Scripture is the Word of God. We might think that our faith in the truthfulness of Scripture is a blind faith, with no arguments to support it. It is the height of irrationality and a groundless commitment—or so we we might think.

The Confession anticipated this kind of objection. Those who wrote of the absolute authority of Holy Scripture recognized that we need to put

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<sup>6</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:89 (2.6.11).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:69 (2.4.22).

some *content* into this affirmation. If we cannot trust ourselves or the church to *establish* a firm foundation, who can we trust? I broached this topic in *Know Why You Believe*, and that motivates me to expand on it here.<sup>8</sup> The apologetic and theological implications of this question are crucial. How can we know that this book is from God himself?

### III. *Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5*

We are now prepared to enlarge on our topic. In section 5 the Confession says:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverend esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the *heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, ARE ARGUMENTS* whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.

In his discussion of this section, Warfield reminds us of its potency. He writes,

Sect. 5 has been strangely appealed to as outlining the Confession's mode of determining the inspiration and consequent canonicity of Scripture .... The Confession ... is here professedly treating an entirely different matter, namely, *how we are brought practically to yield to it the authority which this inspired and canonical book ought to exercise over us*. ... The Confession devotes a paragraph of almost unsurpassed nobility of both thought and phrase, to indicating *how sinful men may be brought to a full practical persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of Scripture*.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, this section is not pointing to the *establishment* of Scripture's authority, attempting to go behind Scripture as our firm foundation. It is outlining the *strength* of our confession of Scripture's authority—a strength so powerful that it ought to cause us to surrender when we grasp its legitimacy. Like a Greco-Roman wrestler, these arguments are meant to pin us down so that we are compelled to yield to their strength, unable to move until we give in.

Section 5 provides a categorical list of *arguments* so that we can see with the eyes of faith the evidence of Scripture's authority. Those arguments cannot be outside the foundation, nor behind it. If they were, then the foundation would need a foundation. Instead, the arguments are embedded

<sup>8</sup> K. Scott Oliphint, *Know Why You Believe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 13–30.

<sup>9</sup> Warfield, "The Westminster Doctrine of the Holy Scripture," 562, 566–67.

*in* the foundation. They are the elements that are poured into the rock-solid foundation of Scripture and give it a substance strong enough to support everything else that is built upon it, including what we confess and believe.

So, we can indicate the “arguments” that the Confession uses for the authority—the majesty even—of Holy Scripture, those elements that make our foundation so gloriously *firm*. As we look at these “signs” we should be asking, “Is this what I really think of my Bible? Do I take this book and open it with this in mind?” If not, then a refresher course on the “signs of Scripture’s supremacy” will help us see the divine content contained in this book and help us recognize what it means to lean wholly on Christ for all that we think and all that we are.

### 1. “*The heavenliness of the matter*”

After recognizing the testimony of the church as an external testimony to Scripture’s authority, the Confession turns to a series of internal arguments, firstly “the heavenliness of the matter.” Thomas Boston says that the heavenliness of the matter is “the sublime mysteries therein revealed, which nature ever so much elevated could *never* attain to the discovery of.”<sup>10</sup> The heavenliness of Scripture finds expression in those doctrines which could never be conjured up by the efforts of mere mortals. These are matters that are and remain beyond our ability to comprehend. As the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:9–10:

As it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

What Paul is giving to the church, under the inspiration of the Spirit, are those truths that we could never see, hear or imagine of ourselves. Of this passage, Charles Hodge says,

The meaning of this verse is plain. . . . Paul had said, he preached the hidden wisdom of God, which none of the princes of this world knew; he taught what no eye hath seen, nor ear heard, nor heart conceived. That is, he *preached truth undiscoverable by human reason*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Boston, “An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion, Part 1,” in *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston*, ed. Samuel M’Millan (Aberdeen: George & Robert King, 1848), 1:28.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857), 37.

The “heavenliness of the matter” reminds us that it is not possible, by human wisdom, to conjure up a religion that would have, as its central focus, the glory of the Triune God and the salvation that he offers in Jesus Christ. No other religion has ever come close to these heavenly truths.

In one of his most articulate and inspiring moments John Owen was able to describe for us what “heavenliness” entails. The first, long sentence alone is worth a few hours of contemplation. Owen puts it this way:

There are some doctrines of the Scripture, some revelations in it, so sublimely glorious, of so profound and mysterious an excellency, that at the first proposal of them, nature startles, shrinks, and is taken with horror, meeting with that which is above it, too great and too excellent for it, which it could desirously avoid and decline; but yet, gathering itself up to them, it yields, and finds that unless they are accepted and submitted unto, though unsearchable, not only all that hath been received must be rejected, but also the whole dependence of the creature on God be dissolved, or rendered only dreadful, terrible, and destructive to nature itself. Such are the doctrines of the Trinity, of the incarnation of the Son of God, of the resurrection of the dead, of the new birth, and the like. At the first revelation of these things nature is amazed, and cries, “How can these things be?” . . . But when the eyes of reason are a little confirmed, though it can never clearly behold the glory of this sun, yet it confesses a glory to be in it above all that it is able to apprehend. I could manifest, in particular, that the doctrines before mentioned, and several others, are of this importance; namely, though great above and beyond the reach of reason, yet, upon search, found to be such, as, *without submission to them, the whole comfortable relation between God and man must needs be dissolved.*<sup>12</sup>

The “heavenliness of the matter” in Owen’s language means that the teachings of Scripture are “so sublimely glorious, of so profound and mysterious an excellency, that at the first proposal of them, nature startles, shrinks, and is taken with horror, meeting with that which is above it, too great and too excellent for it.” The “heavenliness of the matter” is *not* reserved for the scholarly. As Boston puts it, “The light of nature improved by the learned to the utmost advantage, could not teach these things; yet a few fishermen plainly delivered them.”<sup>13</sup> Holy Scripture alone, as the very speech of God, is the place in which heavenliness is given, and given for all, the learned and the unlearned alike.

## 2. “The efficacy of the doctrine” and “the consent of all the parts”

In Luke 24:25–32, two “arguments” for Scripture’s authority go together, “the efficacy of the doctrine” and “the consent of all the parts.” In this passage,

<sup>12</sup> John Owen, “Of the Divine Original of Scripture,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), 16:339–40.

<sup>13</sup> Boston, “An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion,” 28.

two disciples are on a seven-mile journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus, on the third day after the crucifixion, and Jesus begins to walk alongside them. They cannot recognize him, and so he begins to question them, as if he has not heard of the resurrection. They explain what they have heard about the resurrection, but they remain perplexed. So, Jesus says to them:

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, but they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:25–27)

What, then, is the “efficacy of the doctrine” in this passage? The first focuses on the resurrected Christ himself, beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, and *in all the Scriptures!* In other words, Jesus shows the two disciples who he is. Luke highlights the fact that they could not recognize who Christ was as he walked beside them, but they see Christ in *all of Scripture* when Christ revealed himself to them through the Old Testament. Even after their eyes are opened to see him for who he is, they do not say to themselves, “Wasn’t that great when all of a sudden we recognized who he was?” Instead, they say, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he opened to us the Scriptures?” In other words, it was the *effect, the efficacy* of Scripture doctrine that caused their hearts to burn within them. This is no ordinary emotion. It is a glorious “heart burn” as the Word of God itself, interpreted to them by the One of whom the entire Word speaks, causes their hearts to burn with a passion for Christ and his glory: the efficacy of the doctrine.

This passage also directs us to “the consent of all the parts.” Luke wants us to recognize that this preeminent lesson in hermeneutics from the risen Savior was not a random “pick and choose” lesson from Scripture. Jesus did not select specific passages from the Old Testament to show them who he was. Instead, “*beginning* with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in *all the Scriptures* the things concerning himself” (v. 27). The necessary conclusion that forces itself upon us is that the entire Old Testament agrees in its testimony concerning Christ. Jesus showed these two disciples “the consent of all the parts.” He used that very argument in interpreting Scripture to them. “Look,” he said in effect,

“see how what has happened over these three days is all given to you in the Old Testament!”

Jesus said something similar to the Jews, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and *it is they that bear witness about me*” (John 5:39), and then he said, “For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; *for he wrote of me*” (v. 46).

The consent of all the parts means that it all points to Christ; the Old Testament points us forward to him, as Jesus himself made clear to those disciples on the road to Emmaus, and the New Testament points back to him, as well as forward to our life with him now and into eternity. It all comes together in him. This one passage includes the efficacy of the doctrine and the consent of all the parts.

### 3. “*The majesty of the style*”

There is a reason why the Bible is the most quoted book in the world; indeed, it has sold almost four billion copies in the last 50 years. That fact may be related to this particular “argument”: the majesty of the style. Boston puts it this way:

There are in several passages of the Old Testament such a loftiness of style, so grand an assemblage of bold images and representations, such a collection of noble and majestic sentiments, and so much magnificence and pomp of language, as cannot be found in any human writings whatever. There is something so truly majestic and sublime, so grand and magnificent in the style of the sacred writings, as has forced heathen philosophers to acknowledge it .... At the same time let it be observed, that there is nothing affected, no flights of false eloquence, no exertions of a luxuriant genius, no laboured strokes of a warm imagination, no forced images, no distorted metaphors, no quaint allusions, or unnatural comparisons which are frequently found in the most admired productions of ancient and modern writers; but the utmost *plainness and perspicuity, a noble simplicity, and an elegant familiarity*, level to the capacity of the illiterate, reign throughout the sacred volume. So that its style must engage the attention and regard of the learned philosopher and poet, and delight the unlearned peasant.<sup>14</sup>

The Bible possesses a “noble simplicity” and “elegant familiarity.”

How about this for “noble simplicity” and “elegant familiarity”: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps 23:1)? We hear this Psalm in all kinds of contexts—even staged funerals in movies or on television. It may have become *so* familiar to us that we can miss its nobility and elegance. At a time and in a place where the role of “shepherd” was so familiar and so well-defined, what do we read? “The LORD is *my* shepherd.” What better

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 28–29.

way to imagine our relationship to the Lord than this? He is the shepherd; he is the one who cares for us. We are the sheep, too inept to properly care for ourselves. Further, if “the LORD is my shepherd,” what is the result of his care? “I shall not want”—there is nothing that I lack. If you are one who lacks something that you think is essential to you, then the Lord is not your shepherd. If he is your shepherd, you shall not want.

Or, concerning the noble simplicity and elegant familiarity, how about this passage as well: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Rom 11:33)? A simple statement, but a statement so majestic that a lifetime of meditation could not unravel it. The very statement itself points to our lack of ability, while it highlights the incomprehensible character of the one we worship. It is a simple statement, a statement of praise, and the praise is directed to what we *cannot* comprehend. That is true majesty that, by definition, transcends all that is mundane, including our own thoughts.

#### **4. “The scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God)”**

This one should be most familiar to us, though it can be one of the most difficult to grasp for many. What is the point of it all? What is the proper scope of Scripture? “The scope of the whole,” the glory of God, should be most familiar to us, though it can be difficult to grasp for many. Notice, for example, how Paul’s words give glory to God in Ephesians 1:3–14, or how he glorifies God in his explication of that difficult doctrine of eternal election in Romans 9:21–24, or how the book of Revelation elevates God and Father: “to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Rev 1:5–6). The end of our history and the beginning of our eternity will include the glory of God, giving light to our eternal existence in the new heavens and the new earth: “And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, *for the glory of God gives it light*, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev 21:22–23). Or, should we desire noble simplicity and elegant familiarity combined with the scope of the whole, nothing is better than Romans 11:36: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” The scope of it all is to give glory to God. It all points to him; it never, ultimately, points to us.

The Westminster Confession expresses this so well when it articulates the doctrine of God’s eternal decree:

Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory,

out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto: and *all to the praise of his glorious grace.* (WCF 3.5)

Much more could be said, but this proper emphasis on “the scope of the whole” should prompt us to ask if we cherish and maintain that emphasis in our lives, or are we too focused on ourselves to see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” as it shines “in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6)?

This great truth should comfort us if we see it properly. Even in those things—and there are many of them—where we cannot see the point or discern the reason, our first thought should be, “This is all, somehow and in some way, to the glory of God.” When we come across a passage of Scripture that is difficult for us, we should remember “the scope of the whole” as we wrestle through it. It is always and everywhere about the glory of God.

### **5. “The full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation”**

Even from the entrance of sin, the clear and stunning truth is that if man is going to be saved from the sin that we brought into God’s good creation, God himself would have to do it. Adam and Eve made coverings of fig leaves to cover their shame after they had sinned. Nevertheless, even as God pronounced judgment on them, he made clothing for them from animal skins. If Adam and Eve were to be properly clothed, only God could provide covering for them. Fig leaves were woefully insufficient. In this act of the Lord clothing his sinful creatures, according to John Bunyan, “the Lord God *did preach* to Adam and to his wife.”<sup>15</sup> He preached to them that he alone could solve their problem. If they were to escape their guilt and shame, they could not do it by fig leaves. The Lord God himself would have to cover their shame. In providing them with skins, the Lord preached to them that proper clothing could only come through the shedding of blood so that our sinful condition can be covered. *We* could not do it; *the Lord* himself would have to do it. The rest, as we know, is history. Throughout subsequent redemptive history, the resounding refrain is that God must accomplish what we cannot. Our sin has so radically damaged us that unless God intervenes and covers us, we will be lost, for eternity.

God spends the entirety of history intervening. What he continues to demonstrate is that if *he* does not save, there is no salvation, and he demonstrates that he *will* intervene. Instead of us trying to save ourselves with the

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<sup>15</sup> John Bunyan, “An Exposition of the Ten First Chapters of Genesis,” in *The Works of That Eminent Servant of Christ, Mr. John Bunyan* (Edinburgh: Sands, Murray, & Cochran, 1769), 6:331.

weakness of fig leaves, *he* will save us through the blood of an acceptable sacrifice, and that sacrifice, if it is going to be acceptable, would have to be undefiled. There is only one who can accomplish this.

God accomplishes the exodus through the mediation of Moses. But what has to happen if the Lord's people are to be brought from slavery in Egypt to the promised land? The final plague has to happen—the firstborn sons have to die. There must be the shedding of blood, the blood of a son, if there is going to be redemption from Egypt. And the shed blood is the mark that causes the angel of death to “pass over” the Lord's people. No wonder Jesus reserved his harshest words for those who were supposed to be experts in the Old Testament: if they really believed Moses, they would believe him.

The clarity of the gospel is given throughout redemptive history and Scripture. However, despite that clarity, it remains one of the most difficult things for us adequately to absorb. Our strong tendency is to descend again into some idea that it is up to us to save ourselves. We must constantly return to that most profound of all teachings, which was “delivered to you as of first importance . . . : that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4). Moreover, when Paul says, “in accordance with the Scriptures,” he means that this gospel has been taught since the inception of redemptive history. The “full discovery of our salvation,” which is an “argument” for Scripture's authority, has always been that “salvation belongs to the Lord” (Jonah 2:9). If we are to be saved, only *he* can save us.

## 6. “The entire perfection thereof”

The final “argument” that the Confession gives us is the recognition that Scripture does not lack anything that we need as Christians in order to live lives that are pleasing to our Savior.

A distinction has been made, historically, between what is called *perfectio essentialis* (essential perfection) and *perfectio integralis* (integral perfection). *Perfectio essentialis* applies to what the text says, but the argument that the Confession is concerned to highlight here is the *perfectio integralis*, which means that Scripture is complete; there is nothing that needs to be, or should be, added to the Word of God.<sup>16</sup>

This truth has deep and profound implications for the way we view Scripture. Do we view it as a kind of general roadmap for Christian living, to

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<sup>16</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 222.

which must be added specific “words of knowledge” or a “still, small voice” on occasion so that we can know what the Lord *really* wants us to do? If Scripture is *perfect*, then there is no such need.

The Westminster Confession goes on to say, in chapter 1, section 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 in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added.

In other words, Scripture is perfect; it is complete. So Paul says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, *that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim 3:16–17).

This one “argument,” as it is given in the Westminster Confession, could have taken up the entire lecture. There are so many ways in which the perfection of Scripture is undermined and denied that it is crucial for us to recognize its foundational import. It was, after all, one of the most central arguments to be lodged against the Roman Catholic church, as it sought routinely to “add” to Scripture by way of papal and church authority.

## Conclusion

Two more brief, final points can be made. Now that we have seen and contemplated all the “arguments” that are listed in this noble paragraph, are we convinced? We should be, but the Confession goes on to recognize a most necessary point. Because of the depth of our sin and depravity, there are *no* arguments, not even thoroughly biblical arguments, that, in and of themselves, can convince us. The problem is not in the arguments but in ourselves. So, section 5 of the first chapter of the Confession concludes, “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.”

Only by the Holy Spirit does the bright light of Scripture pierce through our blindness and open our eyes to the beauty of its warm and glorious rays. Apart from the Spirit’s work, the “arguments” given in this Confession are to us foolish and without merit. We recognize, then, that, as powerful and substantial as these “arguments” are, they require the Spirit of God to work in us, or we will suppress them and count them as nothing. The arguments are available to every person—arguments that testify to the majestic character of the Word of God, including its intrinsic authority. If you are

convinced by these “arguments,” then praise the Lord for the work of his Spirit in you.

Finally, we should see that all of these “arguments” for Holy Scripture could be applied to Christ himself. These characteristics of the Word are meant to point us to *the Word himself*, the Lord Jesus Christ. In him we see the heavenlyness of the matter as he comes down from heaven to save his own. We see his efficacy as he himself says to his Father, “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). We see his majesty as he alone is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah; we see in him that perfect example of what it means to give all glory to God so that he alone can say to his Father, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (John 17:4); we see in him the full discovery of the only way of our salvation, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6); and finally, we see in him the perfect completion of God’s revelation so that the Lord’s people lack nothing, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb 1:1–2a).

God has spoken. He has spoken in heavenly, majestic, perspicuous, and perfect ways. He has spoken in and through his Word, and that Word, if indeed the Holy Spirit works by and with it in our hearts, points us now, and every day, into eternity, to that Word who took on flesh so that we might have perfect fellowship with him. Moreover, Scripture is sufficient. It is sufficient for all doctrine. It is fully and perfectly sufficient for you, when the deep waters threaten and the fire rages. In all of it the Lord has spoken. He has, finally and completely, spoken through his majestic Son.

What more can he say than to you he has said,  
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?