

Westminster Confession of Faith Class
Lesson 0.0.1: A Defence of Confessionalism
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§1. The Goal of this Study

The goal of our study of the Confession is to understand the WCF. My goal in my preparation is to be able to accurately explain the doctrine of the Confession, and to prove it to you from Scripture.

Levels of Understanding, and Agreement

- (1) Understanding: There may be things in the Confession that you understand. There may be things you know you don't understand, and there may be things you don't realize you don't understand. Example: Upon first read, I thought I understood Ch. 3 on The Eternal Decree, and Ch. 5 on Divine Providence, but it wasn't until years later that I realized how much I did not understand, because of the technical language in those paragraphs, and the history behind it, which I was unaware of.
- (2) Agreement: When you read through the WCF for the first time, there will be things that you immediately recognize as Biblical. These are things that you probably already believe, although you might not have been able to articulate it as precisely and clearly as the Confession. Chapter 9 on the Doctrine of Justification may be an example of this.
- (3) Disagreement: There may be other things that you read in the Confession which you disagree with. You see the proof text but cannot see how the conclusion in the Confession follows from it. Example: Ch. 28 on Baptism cites Mt. 28.18-20 as proof that only ordained ministers of the gospel may administer baptism. It may not be immediately clear, or may seem patently false to you, that this text teaches this.

Our goal therefore is to understand what the Confession says, and then to wrestle through the Scriptures and come to see that its conclusions are indeed Biblical.

§2. Why Study the Westminster Confession of Faith?

As Christians, we have a duty to seek unity—not only unity in familial love, which I think we as a church excel in—but also unity of mind. This is actually commanded in the Scriptures:

Phil. 1.27: stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel

Phil. 2.2: Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind

1Cor. 1.10: Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

1 Pet. 3.8: be ye all of one mind

Our Confession of Faith serves the purpose of bringing us together to have a like precious faith, as Peter puts it, so that we may all be of one mind, speaking the same thing, as the Scriptures command us. To this end, the Ministry of the Word was established by Christ:

Ephesians 4

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: 14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; 15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: 16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

Objection: We only need the Bible. The Westminster Confession is just a man-made tradition; we should have no confession but the Bible itself.

Answer: While this sounds pious on the surface, it fails consider the fact that the Word of God is not only the letters and syllables of Scripture, but the sense of them. Not only the words, but what they mean.

It is not sufficient to affirm the words of the Bible while holding to a false interpretation of it. One must affirm not only words of the Bible, they must also affirm the correct interpretation of it. This is actually proved in Scripture itself. A few examples:

(1) In Mat. 22.23-32, Jesus is confronted by a heretical sect called the Sadducees which denied the resurrection of the dead, angels, and spirits (which is heresy). Jesus proves the doctrine of the resurrection of the words “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” This is covenantal language. The implication which Jesus draws from this Old Testament text is that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living; therefore they are alive in the spirit even now, though dead in the flesh. Here is Westminster Divine, Samuel Rutherford:

“Now that it is not sufficient that they be put to subscribe a confession of faith in only scripture words is clear, 1. because the Jews will swear and seal the Old Testament in their own sense, but their sense makes the old Testament to be the word of man, not the word of God. The Sadducees acknowledged the five books of Moses to be the word of God, yet because they denied the resurrection of the dead; Christ argueth them Math. 22.45. Ignorant both of the power of God asserted in the books of Moses and of the scriptures, especially of that scripture which God spake out of the bush to Moses; *I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, etc...* Exod. 3.6. Yet would the Sadducees have sworn and subscribed all the book of Exodus as the undoubted word of God, but when they denied the resurrection, sure these words *I am the God of Abraham etc...* making the Covenant of grace to die when Abraham died, and Abraham to have perished in soul

and body as they expounded it, was not the word of God; and Papists will subscribe the old and new Testament and the three creeds, the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Athanasius, and that which commonly is called the Apostles Creed. Yet as they expound the word and these Creeds, we say they transform the word of God into the doctrine of devils and most abominable Idolatry, the greatest heretics that were, Arrius, Nestorius, Appollinaris, Macedonius, the Treithite acknowledge the scripture to be the word of God, and will swear and subscribe the word of God and contain themselves *intra sacre scripture lecutiones, within the words of scripture*. But their faith is not the faith of the scripture, and this makes ten thousand and millions of faiths whereas the word saith there is but one faith. For Arrius hath one faith, Apollinaris another, Nestorius another, and every heretic a faith according to the sense that he falsely puts on the scripture, and all may swear one confession of faith in scripture words.”¹

(2) The examples of Stephen in Acts 7, and Paul in Acts 26, when they were accused of heresy; and the covenants of Nehemiah, Jehoiada . Here is Westminster Divine Samuel Rutherford:

“Fourthly, That no confessions ought to be but in express words of Scripture, shall free all men and consequently all Churches from obedience to that which Peter commands. 1 Pet. 3.15, 'Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.' When Stephen, Acts 7, and Paul, Acts 26, were accused of heresy and speaking against Moses and the temple, they made a confession of their faith not in words of Scripture, but in deductions and necessary consequences drawn from Scripture and applied to themselves, and those in Nehemiah's time who wrote and sealed or subscribed a Covenant, did not write and seal the express, Decalogue and ten Commandments, nor the words of the Covenant of Grace, 'I will be thy God and the God of thy seed', but entered into a curse and into an oath to walk in God's Law which was given by Moses the servant of God and to observe, and to do all the Commandments of the Lord our God and his judgments and his statutes and that (say they) we would not give our daughters to the people of the Land, not take their daughters for our sons, and if the people of the Land bring ware or victuals on the Sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them and Nehemiah 10.29-34, &c. compared with Nehemiah 9.38. Which words are not a confession nor Covenant in express Scripture, save that they are historically inserted in the Cannon of the Scripture by the Holy Ghost.”²

§3. What authority does the Confession of Faith have?

The Confession is a secondary rule of faith (ruled by Scripture itself) for the good order and unity of the Church, which is not inherently authoritative, but is only authoritative insofar as it is

¹ Samuel Rutherford, *A Free Disputation Against Pretended Liberty of Conscience* (London: Printed by R.I. for Andrew Crook, 1649), p. 31.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

a faithful exposition of Scripture. The Bible *is* inherently authoritative. Its authority cannot be questioned, and it must be held to be infallible, absolutely incapable of error. When it comes to the Bible, you simply need to submit to it. The Confession, on the other hand, is authoritative on account of its agreement with Scripture, and does not possess inherent authority.

Here is Rutherford again:

“Say that the decision of the Synod be agreeable to the word; the Lord layeth on the coaction to all, to believe and accordingly profess the truth, and that by a Synod as Christ saith, *he that heareth you heareth me*: so the coaction, such as it is, must come principally from God; instrumentally from the Synod; but it floweth from both by accident, and through men’s abuse, who receive not the truth in love, but for fear of shame, lest they should by the godly go for perverters of souls, Act. 15. that they do hypocritically profess what they ought sincerely to believe and profess; may we not say many men of corrupt minds believed circumcision to be necessary, and yet for fear of the Apostles’ censure that they should be judged troublers of souls, liars and false teachers, as they are judged to be Act. 15.24. would dissemble? And they are no other ways by a Synodical truth compelled to lie and dissemble by shame and falling out of the hearts of the Apostles and of all the godly the one way than the other; in that case than in this case. For there be but two ways of working on the mind to drive men to be of another opinion, one by fear either of shame, reproach or censures civil or ecclesiastical, another by mere teaching and instructing.”³

And Francis Turretin⁴:

VIII. However, two things can be stated about these confessions: first, their necessity; then, their authority. As to the necessity, we say that it is not absolute, as if the church could not do without them. For there was a time when she was without them, being content with the ecumenical creeds alone or even without these, content with the formula of Scripture alone; but hypothetical on the hypothesis of a divine command and of the condition of the church, from the time when heresies, the danger of contagion, the calumnies of adversaries and intestine discords in religion began to disturb her, that the necessity and justice of our secession from the church might be manifested, that they might be formulas of agreement and a bond of saving union by which all the pious might be held together in one body and so all distractions, dangerous dissents and schisms, wounding the truth and unity of the church, might be shunned.

IX. Their authority ought indeed to be great with the pious in the churches but still sinking below the authority of the Scripture. For the latter is a rule, they the thing ruled. It alone is self-credible (*autopistos*) with respect to words as well as to things, divine and infallible; they, as divine in things, still in words and manner of treatment are human writings. Faith is immediately and absolutely due to it; to them an examination is due

³ Ibid., p. 23.

⁴ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), pp. 284–5.

and that having been made, if they agree with the word, faith. It is the constant and immutable canon of faith; while they are subject to revision and new examination, in which it is right not only to explain and amplify them, but also to correct whatever fault should be found in them and reform according to the rule of the word. Hence it is evident that they err here in excess who hold such confessions as the rule of the truth itself and make them equal to the word of God. They are at best secondary rules, not of truth, but of the doctrine received in any church, since from them can be seen and decided what agrees with or what differs from the doctrine of the church.

X. Therefore, their true authority consists in this—that they are obligatory upon those who are subject to them in the court of external communion because they were written by the churches or in the name of the churches, to which individual members in the external communion are responsible (1 Cor. 14:32). Hence if they think they observe anything in them worthy of correction, they ought to undertake nothing rashly or disorderly (*ataktōs*) and unseasonably, so as to violently rend the body of their mother (which schismatics do), but to refer the difficulties they feel to their church and either to prefer her public opinion to their own private judgment or to secede from her communion, if the conscience cannot acquiesce in her judgment. Thus they cannot bind in the inner court of conscience, except inasmuch as they are found to agree with the word of (which alone has power to bind the conscience).

XI. Therefore, they err in defect who acknowledge no authority or a very slight authority in confessions; such are the neutrals and Libertines, who, to consult their own interests, profess nothing certain and determinate, but amid the conflicts of contradictions are undecided and fluctuate and, falling in with the winds of fortune, bend their sails to their influence. Their religion, consequently, you would properly call (if they have any) a monthly faith; nay, even a daily (*hēmerobion*) or hourly. Unorthodox persons and heretics are such who, seeing that they are checked by such formulas as by a bridle that they may not scatter their errors to the winds, endeavor in every way, either openly, or secretly and by cunning, to destroy their authority.