



## Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1: Special revelation

*The Westminster Confession of Faith begins with a statement of its doctrine of Scripture. Why begin here? One answer at least is that in a sense the doctrine of Scripture in its finality and authority was what the Reformation was all about. The Reformers brought men and women back to the supremacy of the Bible.*

*Another reason is that the Confession is reminding us that without Scripture nothing else could be known. All we know of the being, decrees, purpose and salvation of God are known through the Bible. The place of the doctrine of Scripture, therefore, at the beginning of the Confession, serves to highlight the importance and priority that must be ascribed to the Word of God.*

And yet the Confession reminds us also that Scripture is not the only place where God reveals Himself. There is a general revelation, a disclosure of God in the created order. Or, as Romans 1 has it, God's invisible things are manifest in the things that are created, and they are understood by natural man.

This is qualified for us in two ways. First, by the fact that what God reveals of Himself in nature, though apparent and clear, is not in itself sufficient for salvation. You cannot argue from the phenomena of creation to the condition of fallen man, nor can you glean information from the nature of things around you that the atonement is full and free in Christ. This particular information can only be received by *special* revelation.

Secondly, despite this, general revelation is enough to condemn; it leaves men without excuse before God. Paul's position in Romans is that the idolater is guilty before God, even if he has never consulted the Bible. Even having known God through the general revelation of creation, he glorifies him not as God, neither is he thankful.

General revelation, in other words, confirms man in his sin if he does not honour the Creator, but it cannot confirm man in grace. To know God savingly requires a special revelation of Himself on the part of God.

That special revelation means a special act of grace is registered in the Confession by the words "it pleased God". There was no compulsion except within God's own sovereign and free purposes. The exercise of His mercy was always an option, and He chose to travel this particular road.

That this was a singular mercy is seen in the fact that eternal life is to know God, and God cannot be known except by revelation. John 1:18 is clear on this - God requires to be exegeted to us, and only the Son can do this.

There can be no discrepancy between the information conveyed through natural revelation and through supernatural revelation. Scientific enquiry on the part of a Christian is only possible because the same God has revealed Himself in the data of creation, which can be subjected to scientific analysis, and also in the data of the Bible.

His special revelation, the declaration of His will to the Church, was at the beginning neither instantaneous nor monoform. That is to say, it was not possible, for any believer in the Old Testament, who heard the authentic voice of God in revelation to say: 'That was God's last word', or to say: 'That was God's last way'. This is meaning of "*sundry times and divers manners*" - no revelation was final, and no method was definitive.

But even in the Old Testament we find God's special revelation is given through both deed and word - through the act of redemption and the accompanying explanation. BB Warfield writes of *"how little is capable of being revealed by even the mightiest deeds, unaccompanied by the explanatory word"* (article on "Christian Supernaturalism"). The exodus from Egypt, for example, is God's saving act, and is accompanied by the explanatory word through Moses, in law and in the prophetic utterances.

Similarly, in the New Testament, God's redemptive scheme is revealed through the decisive act of Calvary and the apostolic teaching regarding it. Special revelation, therefore, is a revelation both of God's mighty, decisive works and God's declaratory, interpretative words.

Our confidence, therefore, is that God both did what was necessary to save His people and gave an explanation of what He did. This explains too that the devil's attack from the beginning has been - *"hath God said...?"* If he can undermine the veracity of the revelation, he then undermines the veracity of the redemption. Belief in the inerrant, final authority of Scripture is integral element in submitting to the righteousness of God.

Indeed, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to see how one can be a Christian without it. For the Confession goes on to say that the Bible is "most necessary". Former methods of communication are ceased; angels, visions and prophetic thunderings have given way to the written word. There is now a normative medium of revelation that is, through an inspired and infallible Scripture.

The Confessional position is that God's revelation was committed to writing for two reasons. The first was in order that the truth might be better preserved. The saving acts of God were recounted from one generation to the next (see Deuteronomy 6:20-25); but for the better preserving of the sacred record, the whole was committed to writing, first in Hebrew, then in Greek.

The second reason for the inscripturation of the revelation was that the Church might be the better equipped. Through the possession of God's revelation in written form, she is more surely established and comforted, and she has equipment which will fortify her against attacks from within and from without. God has thus, in His great goodness and mercy, provided His people with a Bible that reflects His own character as a full and sufficient God.

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