



## Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1: The perfection of Scripture

*The Confessional position regarding the ability of the Bible to give revelation necessary unto salvation is expressed in section 6 in terms of the Bible's inherent perfection. What we require to know in order to give glory to God and find salvation for ourselves is there. The Bible is up to its task and its promise. The Bible does not give exhaustive knowledge; it gives true knowledge. And the knowledge it gives is what is necessary for our good.*

There is a clear polemic here against an unwarranted traditionism. Roman Catholicism claimed for herself the custodianship of what is knowable, but unwritten, about God. The testimony of tradition was vital to supplement the imperfections of the Bible. But as Wayne Spear reminds us in *To Glorify and Enjoy God*, "*the sufficiency of Scripture was a charter of freedom for God's people*". The Reformation stress on the perfection of the Bible liberated the people of God from reliance on tradition.

The complex of statements in which the perfection of Scripture is expressed is as follows:

- a. the Bible contains all that man needs to know for God's glory;
- b. the Bible contains all that man needs to know for his own salvation, faith and life;
- c. the Bible either expressly sets these items before us; or
- d. these can be deduced from Scripture by 'good and necessary consequence'.

The perfection of Scripture does not mean that for any and every question it is possible to look up an index and find a proof-text; it means that the truth that is contained therein, and conveyed to us either *directly* (by the bald statements of the text) or *indirectly* (by the logical implications of the text), is truth to which no more truth requires to be added for our purposes in this present world.

'Good and necessary consequence' follows from the nature of truth. Propositions alone can be said to be true or false. The Confessional position is that God's word is truth; every proposition has to be affirmed as true. It follows, therefore, that a valid inference from a true proposition will be true also. For example, in Romans 5:12 we have the proposition 'all have sinned'. This is a true proposition; the statement 'all children have sinned' is a valid inference from it, and therefore a true proposition in itself. If we make valid inferences from Scriptural propositions, we will have true propositions.

George Gillespie reminds us of the importance of this. For many of his beliefs, he said, "*no express Scripture will prove it*" (*Worldly Saints*, p.143). No *express* Scripture will prove infant baptism, exclusive psalmody or even the doctrine of the Trinity; but this does not make them untrue doctrines. These can all be validly inferred from the true propositions of the Bible. Any deduction from Scripture that is logical and valid is to be regarded as authoritative and infallible.

It is possible, of course, to make an *invalid* deduction from a true statement that will give you a true proposition, not because of the inference but for other reasons. To say 'it is wet in Edinburgh today because it is wet in Back' is to make an invalid deduction; but it may well be wet in Edinburgh. Similarly, many preachers have made invalid deductions from the propositions of their texts and still preached the truth. Or, as James Denney would say, "*that is the truth, but it is not the truth taught in my text.*"

All our inferences and deductions from Scriptural propositions are to be examined in the light of Scripture. That Christ says to sinners "*Come unto me*" might, with validity, yield the inference that a sinner is able, by the power of contrary choice, to come to Christ. But weighed in the Bible's own light, the conclusion is unwarranted. More information is required. The sinner's coming requires the intervention of grace.

The Confession is making Scripture, not logic, our guide. All our propositions must have a Scriptural foundation; you do not know, as Samuel Johnson put it, where deviation from truth will end.

The statement of the Bible's perfection is qualified in two ways. Inward illumination is required if we are to understand the doctrines of Scripture in a saving manner. Inspiration is the uncovering of new truths; illumination is the explaining of old truths. All who were inspired were illuminated; not all who are illuminated are inspired. The apostles and prophets were inspired by God for the public purpose of making the truth known; all of God's children are illuminated by the Holy Spirit for the personal purpose of making the truth effectual.

The second qualification is that there are some particulars for which the Bible lays down no specific rules. These are circumstances which concern the day-to-day running of the church; circumstances which affect any public organisation. Not that the church is just any kind of public organisation. But, like such organisations, there are certain points which can only be governed by general principles. Where will we meet? At what time? How often?

Cunningham explains: "*The circumstances referred to in the Confession, judging from the principles that have usually been held by Presbyterians upon this subject are such as these, provisions and arrangements concerning the external conveniences for and the necessary accompaniments of the worship of God and the government of the church*".

(*Theological Lectures*, p.493)

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