



Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1: The application of Scripture

Having covered the major loci in the Reformed doctrine of Scripture, Chapter 1 of the Confession ends with a section on the *application* of the Bible in the life and witness of the church.

Section 9 dealt with the Bible as a *rule*; section 10 deals with the Bible as a *judge*, as one who applies laws and rules in particular areas over which there is disagreement and controversy. And the judgement of the Bible in such cases is held to be binding, authoritative and final.

This gives us a perspective on the whole of the Westminster Assembly itself. The Confession of Faith is in and of itself binding on no one. We are duty-bound to bring its statements to the test of Scripture. None can lawfully accept the Confession as the confession of their faith unless they are satisfied that its terms are consonant with the teaching of Scripture, and no-one ought to make this affirmation who has not made his own study of this matter.

Two matters are highlighted at this point.

The jurisdiction of the Bible

Five categories are explicitly mentioned in the Confession over which the Bible has binding and final authority.

- First: *controversies of religion*. Of which, it need hardly be said, there are many. Obviously there are areas of disagreement in Christian thought in connection with issues on which the Bible is silent. Section 6, as we saw, makes provision for such cases. But there are disagreements among Bible-believing Christians over issues such as the free offer of the Gospel, common grace, the charismatic movement, the second coming of Christ. The Bible must be the final court of appeal. Our position must be judged in its light, or else it is without warrant.
- Second: *decrees of councils*. Church councils are necessary for the management and organising of the church's public life and witness. The church needs to deliberate on policies, and make decisions. But the Bible must always remain above any Act of Assembly. There is an opportunity to register disagreement over ecclesiastical decisions; but no dissent is possible from biblical doctrine.
- Third: *opinions of ancient writers*. It is good to read ancient writers. We are the more impoverished as believers if we do not read them. But it is no satisfactory, binding conclusion to any argument to quote Spurgeon, Owen or Calvin. It is, however, a binding conclusion to quote Matthew, Paul or Jude.

Both Bunyan and Spurgeon have fed, encouraged and lightened many Scottish Presbyterian paedobaptists, although they were both independent and separatist in their ecclesiology, and both held to adult baptism by immersion, although with differences in their approaches. In the light of Scripture we cannot hold the same views as them on these particular subjects. But error at the circumference does not mean heresy at the centre, and at the centre we can have the same commitment to the Gospel that they had. More, indeed than we can have with some modern writers.

- Fourth: *doctrines of men*. We can so elevate men in our estimation that their very profile becomes a snare to us. But Christ says "*Beware of men*"; and the moment we set up men as the adjudicators of truth, we are in difficulties.
- Fifth: *private spirits*. Even the claim that one has had special insight by supernatural revelation is to be judged in the light of Scripture. As 1 Corinthians 14:32 makes clear, the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.

The judgement of the Bible

Ecclesiastical councils, ancient writings, opinions of men — all must be brought to this touchstone. The acid test of our Christianity is whether we are willing to bow intellectually before the claims of Christ's truth. As Ned Stonehouse put it: "*To acknowledge the final authority of the God of Christian theism, the God of the Bible, is ... to guarantee intellectual and moral integrity*" (*The Infallible Word*, p.136). Apart from this final court of appeal there could be no Christian mind.

By deferring constantly to the Word of God, we allow the Holy Spirit to try every case, every opinion and every position we adopt. We are called to 'search the Scriptures'; but it is more like the Scriptures searching us, as the living and powerful word it is. The whole question of authority in the church is settled by the Confession of Faith at this particular point.

The believer, and the believing community are to rest and acquiesce in the sentence passed by God. He has the last word, the determining, authoritative word. One of the Puritans put it thus: "*in reading any command or prohibition in Scripture we must make particular application of it to ourselves, as if God had directed it to us in particular, or had spoken to us by name or sent a special message from heaven to us*" (*Worldly Saints*, p.153).

Or, to put it otherwise:

*And when thou read'st what there is writ,
Let thy best practice second it;
So twice each precept writ should be,
First in the Book, and then in thee.*

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