NEW HOPE
Presbyterian Church

THE TEACHING OF THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION
On the Cessation of Special Revelation

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According to chapter one of the Westminster Confession of Faith, God, at various times in the past, revealed *that knowledge of [Himself] and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation.* (1.1) Throughout redemptive history *it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church.* (1.1) He now has CEASED employing these means: *those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.* (1.1) Thus *Holy Scripture . . . [is] most necessary. . . .* (1.1)

In this section the NECESSITY of Scripture is "thus made to rest on the insufficiency of natural revelation and the cessation of supernatural revelation. . . ."[1] So argued Bishop Ussher, whose Irish Articles of Religion are well established as the most important proximate source of the chapter on Holy Scripture,[2] and whose *Body of Divinity*, one of the "chief popular dogmatic handbooks of the age,"[3] has a parallelism of language to the Confession of Faith so close "that it is hard to believe that it did not affect some of the matter or even the phraseology."[4] Ussher argued that

> the whole Canon of the Scriptures being fully finished, wee [sic] and all men, unto the worlds end, are left to have our full instruction from the same without expecting extraordinary revelations, as in times past. . . . Oracles, and Visions. . . . but now they together with all other extraordinary Revelations are ceased.[5]

According to the Confession of Faith, the canon of Scripture is identified by the INSPIRATION of the books. *Under the name of Holy Scripture . . . are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments . . . all of which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.* (1.2) The Apocrypha is excluded from the canon because these books are not inspired. *The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture. . . .* (1.3) The AUTHORITY of the text comes not from its canonical status, but because, being inspired, it is the very Word of God. *The authority of the Holy Scripture . . . dependeth . . . wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.* (1.4) In sum, it is the inspired, or God-breathed, character of a text that estab-

[1] Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing Company, 1972), p. 195.

[2] Ibid., p. 169.

[3] Ibid., p. 176.

[4] Ibid., p. 177.

[5] James Ussher, *Body of Divinity* (London, 1645), pp. 6-7.

lishes its canonicity (or the lack thereof which excludes a pretender from the canon), its authority, and its necessity, the WAYS of inspiration being now ceased.

A believer is PERSUADED that the Scripture is the Word of God when the Holy Spirit works in his heart to make him see the evidence of Scripture's inspiration. *Holy Scripture. . . . doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion . . . is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.* (1.5) Here the Holy Spirit works to open our eyes to what is already there. Nothing at all is added to the text.

According to the Confession the Scripture (i.e., the collection of inspired writings) is SUFFICIENT to know all that God intends to be known for His own glory, and man's salvation, faith and life. *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. . . .* (1.6) Therefore, nothing, by any MEANS, *whether by new revelations of the Spirit* [contra the sectaries] *or traditions of men* [contra Rome] (1.6) is to be taken as authoritative along with the Scripture, *unto which nothing at any time is to be added. . . .* (1.6)

In this instance, *new revelations of the Spirit* must mean PRETENDED new revelations, for a text's character as a revelation from the Spirit (i.e., INSPIRED) is just that which qualifies it to be Scripture. So argued Westminster Divine Edward Reynolds:

> The spirit doth not reveal truth unto us, as he did in the primitive patefaction [manifestation] thereof to the prophets and apostles,—by divine and immediate inspiration, or in a way of simple enthusiasm: but what he reveals, he doth it by and out of the Scriptures. . . .[6]

Further, by *added* the divines are not merely forbidding the binding of new pages in the back of a book, but rather they are opposed to any practical supplementation to those *things necessary for* [God's] *glory, man's salvation, faith and life,* their phrase comprehensive of the entire calling of the believer.

Nevertheless, though all that is objectively needed is in the inspired text, the Spirit of God is subjectively necessary for that ILLUMINATION which allows us to savingly SEE WHAT IS THERE. *Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word. . . .* (1.6)

Finally, the Scripture is confessed to be the SUPREME JUDGE of all religious controversies. Where controversies exist, whether due to divergent church deliverances, teachings of theologians, or "private spirits," the settlement is to be found in no other word but the word of the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture. *The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.* (1.10) So argued Reynolds:

> The scriptures . . . are the alone rule of all controversies. . . . So then the only light by which differences are to be decided, is the word, being a full canon of God's revealed will: for the Lord doth not now, as in former times, make himself known by dreams, or visions, or any other immediate way.[7]

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[6] Edward Reynolds, *Works*, vol. v (1826), pp. 152-153.

[7] Ibid.

Again, another of the Divines:

> 'How may Christians inquire of God in their doubting, as Israel did . . . in theirs?' I must answer briefly, and that in the words of God himself, 'To the law and to the testament': to the written word of God. . . . There is now no other way to inquire of God, but only from his word.[8]

These testimonies continue a well-established Puritan tradition of interpretation concerning the connection between the cessation of the *ways* of revelation, and the *sufficiency* of Scripture, as articulated by such teachers as William Whitaker,[9] Master of St. John's College, Cambridge, whose *Disputation on Holy Scripture* has been shown by Dr. Wayne Spear to be an important source for the theology of the standards, particularly the chapter on Holy Scripture.[10] Whitaker taught his students that "God does not teach us now by visions, dreams, revelations, oracles, as of old, but by the Scriptures alone; and therefore, if we will be saved, we must of necessity know the Scriptures."[11]

To conclude, the *Confession* here speaks of the **WAYS** of revelation being ceased, not merely of the cessation of additions to the final canon. If the ways continued, the canon would be open. It is **BECAUSE** the ways have ceased that there can be no additions to the canon. So comments David Dickson in the first commentary on the Confession of Faith:

> Are these former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people now ceased? Yes. Well then, do not the enthusiasts and Quakers err, who maintain, that the Lord hath not ceased yet to reveal his will as he did of old? Yes. By what reasons are they confuted? Because God, who at sundry times and divers manners, spake in times past unto the fathers, by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his son, Heb. 1:1, 2. . . . The ways and manners of old were first by inspiration. Second by visions. Thirdly by dreams. Fourthly, by Urim and Thummim. Fifthly, by signs. Sixthly, by audible voice. All of which do end in writing, which is a most sure and infallible way of the Lord's revealing his will unto his people.[12]

A final testimony to the truth from an enemy: that the Confession taught the cessation of the ways of revelation was the understanding some of the contemporary opponents of its teaching. William Parker, in his 1651 critique of the Confession of Faith and its "excesses and defects, confusions and disorders," begins with chapter 1, offering his criticism of the saying "ways ceased." He complains that the Divines, when they deny the former "ways," meaning, "extraordinary by dreams, visions, Inspiration and the like, [by which God] revealed his will to the prophets and

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[8] John Lightfoot, *Works*, ed. Pitman, vol. 6, p. 286.

[9] Whitaker was a teacher of the William Perkins, and the uncle of William Gouge, elder statesmen of the Assembly and father of the London ministers.

[10] Wayne Spear, forthcoming in papers commemorating the 350th anniversary of the Westminster Assembly.

[11] Guilielmo Whitakero, *Disputatio De Sacra Scriptura. . . .* (1610); ET, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture, Against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, trans. and ed. for The Parker Society by William Fitzgerald (Cambridge: The University Press, 1849). The citation is from Question the Sixth: Of the Perfection of Scripture, against Unwritten Traditions. Chapter VIII. That the Scriptures are Necessary, p. 521. This is the first of six arguments offered in favor of the proposition.

[12] David Dickson, *Truth's Victory Over Error* (1684).

apostles of old, you are very much mistaken."[13] It is his view that, on the contrary, the "Lord will have prophets in all ages. . . . those extraordinary ways of God's revealing himself never are ceased."[14]

Concluding note: the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America has clearly affirmed its agreement with the teaching of the Confession that the *ways* of revelation have ceased:

> [S]imply affirming the canon is closed, and that supposed new revelations from God add nothing to the deposit of truth found in Scripture does not cover all the negations concerning new revelation from God found in *WCF* I, 1, 6, and *BCO* 7-1. These statements of the standards also negate the idea that any extraordinary ways still continue in addition to Scripture as ways by which God verbally uncovers His will to His people.[15]
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> Not only is the canon of Scripture closed, but no gift is to be allowed which has the practical effect of *functioning* as a normative source of truth or divine instruction from God, along side the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures.[16]

[13] William Parker, *Late Assembly of Divines Confession of Faith Examined* (London 1651), p. 6.

[14] Ibid., p. 8.

[15] *M8GA*, p. 93.

[16] *M16GA*, p. 215.