

## SESSION 2: Finding True North

### Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 11-15:

WCF	WLC	WSC
1	1-5	1-3

### Introduction

In our first session, we discussed the *legitimacy* of confessional theology, how confessions show us the *logic* of biblical theology, and how they serve as a *lens* to help us connect the dots in God's story.

In this session we dive into our Confession and Catechisms to see how they help us find our "true north": showing us both *our true direction* (the meaning of human existence), and directing us to *God's compass* that will guide us to our goal.

### Our True Direction

The biggest question all people face is: "What is the meaning of life?"

In his book, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*,<sup>4</sup> author Donald Miller compares life to telling a story. Just like every story has a main character, employing various means and experiencing various trials in pursuit of some overarching goal, so all people – both Christians and non-Christians – spend their lives seeking something they believe will give their existence meaning and purpose.

Almost two centuries prior to Miller, Scottish Presbyterian Thomas Chalmers tapped into this same idea: *all people are at all times chasing after something*. As we move from childhood to adulthood, our goals may change – yet the fundamental pursuit remains the same:

The boy ceases, at length, to be a slave of his appetite, but it is because a manlier taste has now brought it into subordination – and that the youth ceases to idolize pleasure, but it is because the idol of wealth has become the stronger and gotten the ascendancy and that even the love of money ceases to have the master over the heart of many a thriving citizen, but it is because drawn into, the whirl of city politics, another affection has been wrought into his moral system, and he is now lorded over by the love of power. There is not one of these transformations in which the heart is left without an object.<sup>5</sup>

All of us are telling stories with our lives. As Christians, we seek to live in the better story of God – and we have the duty to invite outsiders to do the same. But we will never succeed simply by showing them that the world's way is bad. *We must also show them that God's way is better*. This is Chalmers's key insight:

Such is the grasping tendency of the human heart, that it must have a something to lay hold of.... The love of the world cannot be expunged by a mere demonstration of the world's worthlessness.... The heart is not so constituted; and the only way to dispossess it of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Donald Miller, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Chalmers, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection."  
<http://manna.mycpanel.princeton.edu/resources/doc/158/raw> (accessed April 9, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

What affection is strong enough to expel the love of the world? J.I. Packer explains:

What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this is what the Christian has in a way no other person has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?<sup>7</sup>

This is what both the WLC and the WSC indicate with their first questions and answers. In speaking of “man’s chief end,” the catechism is answer humanity’s biggest question. The meaning of life is “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”<sup>8</sup>

What do we mean when we speak of *glorifying* God? At its most basic level, “The idea is to ‘magnify.’ Think of a telescope: it does not ‘make large’ a distant planet, but allows you to see how large it really is. If you ‘glorify’ the LORD, you do not make God great – but you recognize God’s greatness.”<sup>9</sup> More specifically, we mean at least six things:<sup>10</sup>

1. Acknowledgement of God’s revelations,
2. Confidence in God,
3. Affection for God,
4. Worship of God,
5. Obedience to God,
6. Promotion of God’s kingdom.

What do we mean when we speak of *enjoying* God? Vincent writes, “to enjoy God, is to acquiesce or rest in God as the chief good, with complacency and delight.”<sup>11</sup> This enjoyment has two stages: enjoying God *here* (in this life), and enjoying God *hereafter* (in eternity). The former involves settling upon, cleaving to the Lord in faith, and enjoying the sensible expressions of his special love. The latter involves seeing God face to face and enjoying the full sense of his love.

It is worth noting, that *we can never separate glorifying and enjoying God*. These twin duties are like two sides of the same coin: if we seek to glorify God, we will learn to enjoy it. If we would truly enjoy God, we must learn to glorify him. “Man’s chief end” is *singular*. The introduction to our standards, then, gives us far more than a preamble. It gives us the “true north” of human existence – the real meaning of life, and the goal toward which our life stories should aim.

## God’s Compass

Having established our goal, the question naturally follows: how do we reach it? A direction is of little use without a compass. *What compass has God provided to point us to man’s chief end?*

The answer given in our standards is simple: the compass to glorifying and enjoying God is the Bible. This is why both our confession and catechisms start with sections discussing Holy Scripture. In the remainder of our session, let us consider the *canon* of Scripture.

The word ‘canon’ comes from the Greek word *kanōn* (“a straight rod used as a rule”) and the Hebrew word *qāneh* (‘reed,’ ‘rod’). It means ‘rule’ or ‘standard’. When we speak of *the canon of Scripture*, we use the word in a sense which means “the *list* of books which are acknowledged to be, in a unique sense, the *rule* of belief and practice.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1993), 34.

<sup>8</sup> WSC 1.

<sup>9</sup> Al LaCour, *“Is There a Global God You Can Trust?” Study Guide* (Atlanta: RUF International, 2010), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1980), 14-15

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 17-18.

According to our confessions, the canon of Scripture consists in the Old and New Testaments. Because these alone are the Word of God, they are “the only rule of faith and obedience” (WLC 1) – “the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him,” (WSC 1). Lest there be any doubt about which books are included (and which are not), the WCF lists out the books of the Old and New Testaments (1.2) – and explicitly rejects the books of the Apocrypha (1.3).

But this raises a foundational question: *how do we know which books are to be included/rejected?* Why do we accept the Hebrew Old Testament, but not the (Greek) Apocrypha? Why do we accept only twenty-seven books in the New Testament?

### **The Canon of the Old Testament**

For the Old Testament, we take as our guide the Lord Jesus himself. In Luke 24.36-49, we have an account of Jesus appearing after his resurrection to his disciples. Especially notable in this passage is what Jesus says in v. 44: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

Why is this important? Because the Hebrew Bible – what we know today as “the Old Testament” – was divided into three parts: *the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings*. “The Law” referred to Genesis-Deuteronomy. Under “the Prophets,” the people of Israel had two divisions. The “Former Prophets” were what we think of as the historical books: Joshua-Kings. The “Latter Prophets” referred to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets. “The Writings” contained all the rest of our Old Testament, and was itself divided into the three sections. In the first section of the Writings was the Psalms. So when Jesus refers to “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” in Luke 24.44, he is recognizing the entirety of the Old Testament!

It is on the basis of this same passage that we reject the Greek Apocrypha. Because it is not mentioned, we have no positive warrant to treat its books as divinely inspired. Why not?

They were not part of the writings of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms, as Luke summarizes the Old Testament canon... Additionally, some of these books hid their true date and authorship under false names or false titles – so many in fact that the entire corpus of additional books is often called the ‘Apocrypha’ (or ‘hidden things’).<sup>13</sup>

Though they may be useful as historical records, they “are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings,” (WCF 1.3).

### **The Canon of the New Testament**

The reason we consider the New Testament to be a part of Scripture is because the Bible treats the New Testament writings as equal to those of the Old Testament. We can see this clearly in 1 Timothy 5.18: “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” In this verse the Apostle Paul cites two passages. The first of these is from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 25.4). The second is from Luke’s Gospel (Luke 10.7). Paul links them together and calls both “the Scripture”! Another place where we see this same thing happening is 2 Peter 3.14-18, where Peter writes the following of the letters of Paul: “There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.” Peter includes Paul’s letters with the “other Scriptures”!

---

<sup>13</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2014), 11.

How do we know which books belong in the New Testament? We rely on the testimony of the early church. Note we said not the *authority* of the early church, but rather her *testimony*. The difference here is crucially important.

In John 1.29-34, we see that John the Baptist was sent by God in order to identify Jesus as the Son of God. John *recognized* Jesus as God's Son, but John did not *make* Jesus into the Son of God! It is the same way with the New Testament. As those Christians living closest to the time of the inspired writers, the early church *recognized* all the books of the New Testament as having authority. But they did not *make* this authority.

How did this recognition unfold? By the latter half of the second century, the early church was beginning to reach a consensus on which Gospel accounts were authentic. For example, Irenaeus – bishop of Lyons – wrote the following:

Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome and laying the foundation of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon his breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, around AD 170, Tatian, an early Assyrian Christian published a volume known as the *Diatessaron* – in which our four canonical Gospels were interwoven into a single, seamless narrative. This testifies to the antiquity of the reception of a “fourfold Gospel.”

At the same time as it was coming to recognize the fourfold Gospel, the church was also in the process of developing a collection of apostolic epistles into an ‘Apostle’ corpus. Clement of Rome, one of the early apostolic fathers writing around AD 96, instructs the church in Corinth to “Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the Apostle. What did he first write to you at the beginning of his preaching? With true inspiration he charged you concerning himself and Cephas and Apollos, because even then you had made yourselves partisans.”<sup>15</sup> This shows us that at least one of Paul’s letters (1 Corinthians) had made it to Rome before the end of the first century – which should be no surprise, as Paul himself encouraged the circulation of his letters (Col 4.16). Clement also quotes from the Letter to the Hebrews.<sup>16</sup>

The link between the ‘Gospel’ and the ‘Apostle’ was the book of Acts. Having been separated from its companion volume (the Gospel of Luke) by the latter’s establishment as part of the fourfold Gospel, it was thereby enabled to act as a link between the two collections.<sup>17</sup>

Formal recognition of the New Testament canon was a process, not an event. The “Muratorian Canon,” a document from the late second century (c. AD 170), lists all of the modern New Testament canon except Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and 3 John. In the first quarter of the fourth century (c. AD 300-325), Eusebius of Caesarea writes:

---

<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.

<sup>15</sup> Clement of Rome, *1 Clement*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, in *Apostolic Fathers I*, vol. 24 in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1912), 47.1-3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 17:1.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 132-133.

At this point it seems reasonable to summarize the writings of the New Testament which have been quoted. In the first place should be put the holy tetrad of the Gospels. To them follows the writing of the Acts of the Apostles. After this should be reckoned the Epistles of Paul. Following them the Epistle of John called the first, and in the same way should be recognized the Epistle of Peter. In addition to these should be put, if it seem desirable, the Revelation of John, the arguments concerning which we will expound at the proper time. These belong to the Recognized Books. Of the Disputed Books which are nevertheless known to most are the Epistle called of James, that of Jude, the second Epistle of Peter, and the so-called Second and third Epistles of John which may be the work of the evangelist or of some other with the same name.<sup>18</sup>

Keeping in mind that Eusebius included Hebrews among the “Epistles of Paul,”<sup>19</sup> we see here all twenty-seven of our New Testament as either ‘recognized’ or “disputed... nevertheless known to most.” The first official church proclamation listing all twenty-seven New Testament books is the Festal Letter of Athanasius (AD 367). But as we have seen from the passages cited earlier, the apostles treated the New Testament writings as Scripture as soon as they were written!

### Preservation

Though the above-surveyed canonization process may seem somewhat messy, it is important for us to realize that there was a definite hand behind it all. Reflecting on our Lord’s promise – “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5.18), our confession reminds us that the canons of the Old and New Testaments, “being immediately inspired by God,” were “by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages,” (WCF 1.8).

### Conclusion

Right from the outset, our confession and catechisms offer us profound teaching. The meaning of human life is double-sided: to glorify and enjoy God. Our guide to this “chief end” is the Word of God written, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Our standards say much more about the Bible. What of its authority and necessity? What of its inspiration and interpretation? What of its clarity, translation, and sufficiency? We will take up such topics in the future.

### Important Questions

1. How does our society answer the question of the meaning of life? How does the Bible’s answer challenge this perspective? How does it show us a better way?
2. How does an understanding of the history of the canon of Scripture enhance your appreciation, as a Christian, for possession of the complete Bible?

### For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 11-15, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
1	1-5	1-3

---

<sup>18</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History, Books I-V*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 153 in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1926), 3.25.

<sup>19</sup> “And the fourteen letters of Paul are obvious and plain, yet it is not right to ignore that some dispute the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it was rejected by the church of Rome as not being by Paul, and I wil expound at the proper time what was said about it by our predecessors,” (ibid., 3.3). In a later section (6.14), he records the tradition that Paul wrote Hebrews in the Hebrew language, and that it was later translated into Greek and published by Luke.