

SESSION 3: The Voice of God

Readings

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

WCF	WLC	WSC
1	1-5	1-3

Introduction

In our last session, we discussed how our standards (our Confession and Catechisms) show us purpose of life, the guide to pursuing that purpose, and the development of the canon of Scripture. In this session we dive into what our standards teach us about the *sufficiency* of Scripture, the *attributes* of Scripture, and the *interpretation* of Scripture.

A Sufficient Guide

Every serious Christian would agree that the Bible is an authoritative guide to Christian belief and practice. However, not every Christian agrees that the Bible is a *sufficient* guide. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches both assert that it is necessary to place extra-biblical Tradition alongside of Scripture. Charismatic churches supplement Scripture by remaining open to regular, new revelations of the Spirit. Finally, many Bible-centered Protestants remain open to the possibility that God might speak to them occasionally in dreams or visions.

In distinction from these perspectives, our standards confess that though “it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself” in the days of the Old Testament and in the apostolic era, God has since been pleased “to commit the same wholly unto writing... those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased,” (WCF 1.1). Later in the same chapter (WCF 1.6), we read:

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: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. 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: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

The position articulated in our standards is known as *cessationism*. It holds that extraordinary revelation, along with all extraordinary gifts, was a temporary provision given to the early church in order to lay its foundation (see Eph 2.19-20). Once the foundation was laid, such extraordinary gifts gradually disappeared. Is this what the Bible teaches?

Our standards cite several key principle passages in defense of cessationism:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Hebrew 1.1-2)

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty... But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

(2 Timothy 3.1, 14-17)

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts...

(2 Peter 1.16-19)

Though our standards do not lay out for us their reasoning step-by-step, their argument seems to be as follows:

1. Hebrews 1.1-2 states that in these "last days," God has spoken to us through Jesus Christ.
2. In his final preserved letter, Paul makes reference to the "last days" and points Timothy to the teaching of Scripture, which he affirms is sufficient to equip believers for "every good work." (See also Jn 20.30-31.)
3. In his final preserved letter, Peter similarly points to the prophetic word as "something more sure" even than his own personal eyewitness experience of the Lord's transfiguration. He encourages his readers to "pay attention" to the word, but does not encourage them to seek experiences similar to his.

In addition to these considerations, we might add the following:

1. The purpose of the extraordinary gifts was to attest to the authority of the message proclaimed by those who exercised them (Rom 15.19, 2Cor 12.12, Heb 2.3-4). Yet in his second letter to Timothy cited above, Paul claims Scripture carries its own authority. Similarly, the apostle John in his first letter writes, "the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth," (1Jn 5.5; cf. Jn 14.26).
2. Apart from Pentecost (Acts 2.1-4) and the household of Cornelius (Acts 10.44-46), the New Testament connects the imparting of extraordinary gifts with the laying on of the hands of the apostles (Acts 8.14-17, 19.6; 2Tim 1.6-7). But Paul asserts that he was the "last of all" to whom Christ appeared, "the least of the apostles" (1Cor 15.8-9).
3. There is some indication that the extraordinary gifts – at least the gift of healing – were vanishing even within the lifetime of the apostles. "Erastus remained at Corinth, and I left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus," (2Ti 4.20). Why is it that Paul, who had healed the sick (Acts 28.8) and even raised the dead (Acts 20.10), had to leave a friend behind who was ill?

From all of the above, it seems that there is great wisdom and biblical support for the cessationist position. However, we should be honest enough to admit that this position faces some difficult questions. For example, what is a cessationist to make of the many reports from Middle Eastern countries, where individuals (many of whom are former Muslims) testify that the Lord Jesus appeared to them in a dream – after which they professed faith and converted to Christianity? The present author once discussed this very question with a senior minister, who himself had served on the foreign missions field. Here is the heart of his reply:

Spiritual experience is a very mysterious and varied thing. That is why having an anchor in Scripture and scriptural thinking is important. There are some verities that provide solid ground. From these it is unsafe to wander. 1. The Spirit of God communicates and saves when, where, and how he pleases. But, 2. Scripture is our only rule for faith and practice. 3. Dreams and experiences may leave a profound impact on us, but they are never to be grounds for action, or even relied upon as guidance. It may be that we ought not to attempt to understand dreams or interpret them by the Bible. Would this still be an attempt to accept them as revelation? And there are dreams, and then there are dreams. Further, 4. there are no new new bodily appearances of Jesus from glory. Paul was the last. Our Lord did reveal himself in dreams and visions and send angels that were perceived as they gave their help. As our Saviour gives his help and deals with our souls and circumstances, are they varied and unusual experiences? Whatever a person's experience may be, if he believes the truth, stands publicly for baptism as a result of believing the Gospel that they have been taught, then we are to accept them as Christians. It is important to realize that 5. we cannot judge the truth or falsity of an account from such a distance. A Basic Rule of Thumb: Healthy skepticism is good, cynical anti-supernaturalism on the other hand, and naïve indiscriminating superstitious credulity are to be avoided at all costs.

We should never argue with phenomena. Furthermore, we should never reject a credible profession of faith due to its unusual origin. However, we should never cease to insist on the sufficiency of Scripture. Scripture is our only rule for faith and practice. Though God is free to reveal himself in an extraordinary manner, we should not *expect* him to do so. The sufficiency of Scripture is not a limit on *God*; it is a limit on *us*.²⁰ When we seek the voice of God, we read the Bible.

The Attributes of Scripture

Throughout its first chapter, the WCF highlights nine attributes of Scripture. These are:

Attribute	Definition	Reference
Necessary	Only source of knowledge necessary for salvation	1.1
Inspired	Breathed out by the Holy Spirit	1.2-3
Self-Attesting	Carries intrinsic divine authority, attested by the Holy Spirit	1.4-5
Sufficient	Contains all things necessary for faith and life, either expressly stated or derived by logical deduction	1.6
Perspicuous	All things necessary for salvation clearly communicated	1.7
Inerrant	The original manuscripts are without error	1.8
Preserved	Original text providentially preserved, despite and through the history of textual transmission	1.8
Self-Interpreting	Difficult passages interpretable via clearer passages	1.9
Supreme	The Holy Spirit speaks in Scripture – thus no higher authority	1.10

Though an exhaustive discussion of these attributes would require numerous dedicated sessions, we may briefly touch upon a few in this section...

Necessary (WCF 1.1). God's revelation in creation and conscience is known as *general revelation*. It reveals to us his existence and our guilt, but not the way of salvation. Therefore what is needed is additional *special revelation* – the gospel message revealed in Scripture.

Inspired (WCF 1.2-3). God's Word was breathed out by his Spirit not in spite of, but through, the personalities of the inspired writers. This view is known as *organic inspiration*: "God acted upon the writers in an organic way. He used them in their own individual personalities. He created them, prepared them, prompted them to write, repressed their sinfulness, and guided them in an organic way to the choice of the very words they wrote."²¹ This is why the Gospel of John sounds different from the letters of Paul. God wanted John's Gospel, so he raised up and called John. The same is true for Paul.

²⁰ The present author is indebted to Rev. Mark Jenkins for this particular expression.

²¹ Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: GPTS Press, 1994), 87.

Self-Attesting (WCF 1.4-5). Though many secondary evidences may enhance our respect for Scripture, our “full persuasion” of its truth and authority must come from God himself: “For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, 15 so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded... Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit.”²²

Inerrant/Preserved (WCF 1.8). Though the autographs are lost, about 5,400 fragments or manuscripts of the New Testament exist today.²³ This body of manuscript evidence, which dwarfs the textual basis for any other piece of ancient literature, is a fulfillment of Christ’s promise (Mt 5.18). “The careful use of textual study enables us to reconstruct the original text on the order of 999 words out of every 1,000. In the New Testament there are only 375 variations that bear on the meaning of the passages, and even here there is no change of a doctrine, precept or fact.”²⁴

The Interpretation of Scripture

Our Confession lists several key principles to be used in the interpretation of Scripture:

1. “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...” (1.6)
2. “...or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (1.6)
3. “Inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary” (1.6)
4. “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all” (1.7)
5. “Those things which are necessary... for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding...” (1.7)
6. “They are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation” (1.8)
7. “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.” (1.9)
8. “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)

Like the attributes of Scripture, the interpretation of Scripture is a topic large enough to require separate, dedicated study.²⁵ However, it will be useful for us to touch briefly upon several:

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vols. 20-21 in *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.7.4-5.

²³ For a more extended, yet accessible, discussion of the manuscripts and their variants, transmission, and reconstruction, see Greg Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 41-58.

²⁴ Smith, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 88.

²⁵ See Resurrection OPC’s 9-part video curriculum, with accompanying written handouts, at: <http://resurrectionopc.org/discipleship/how-to-read-the-bible/>.

Good and Necessary Consequence. Some teachings of the Bible are drawn not from explicit statements, but rather through logical deduction. For example, in Mark 12.24-27, Jesus rebukes the Sadducees for not realizing that Exodus 3.6 (“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”) taught the resurrection of the dead.

Necessity of Inward Illumination. Though our standards teach cessationism, they do not teach anti-supernaturalism. “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God,” (1 Cor 2.12).

Pastors, Personal Study, and Modern Translations. Because “all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all,” pastors and teachers will be necessary. Yet because the basics of the gospel are accessible to all through study, personal study of the Bible is the privilege and responsibility of every Christian to whom Scripture is available. Therefore, the Bible should be translated into the common language of all peoples.

The Analogies of Scripture and of the Faith. Since no human authority may be placed above the voice of God in Scripture, only other Scripture may be used to explain Scripture. Difficult individual passages must be compared to other passages “that speak more clearly” (*the analogy of Scripture*) and to the teaching of the Bible as a whole (*the analogy of the faith*) in order to seek the God-intended sense of the text (“the true and full sense”).

The Holy Spirit Speaking. When Scripture speaks, God speaks. Every time the Bible is read, we heard the voice of God. “If God’s words are his personal, active presence, then to put your trust in God’s words is to put your trust in God... God acts through his words, the Word is ‘alive and active’ (Heb 4.12), and therefore the way to have God dynamically active in our lives is through the Bible. To understand the Scripture is not simply to get information about God. If attended to with trust and faith, the Bible is the way to actually hear God speaking and also to meet God himself.”²⁶

Important Questions

1. How does a cessationist view of revelation bring spiritual stability to the Christian life?
2. Why is it important to be specific about our understanding of inspiration and inerrancy?
3. Does the supremacy of Scripture mean we should discard “all decrees of councils, [and] opinions of ancient writers”?

Additional Resources

- G. Gilbert, *Why Trust the Bible?*
J. Montgomery, “How to Read the Bible”

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 16-18, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
2	6-11	4-6

²⁶ Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 54.