



Following a traditional method of expressing theological loci, the three Puritan confessions begin with the *principium cognoscendi*, the principle of knowing.¹ Chapter one articulates the foundational epistemological basis of Christian theology, namely the Holy Scriptures. These provide the building blocks of all successive doctrinal heads. True theology is erected on the Word of God. It rests on exegesis, collates the results of that task, and carefully articulates the results.

The ten paragraphs present here provide a concise yet full definition of the nature of divine revelation. Various forms of revelation are described in this first chapter, all of which (whatever their potential benefits or liabilities may be) are subordinated to the special revelation recorded in the sixty-six canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. The Word of God written is defined, identified, and its attributes presented. From this objective source all ensuing theological principles are constructed.

*The Necessity of Scripture*²

1. The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible (a) rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith and Obedience; Although the (b) light of Nature, and the works of Creation and Providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and His

1 Muller, *DLGTT*, 290.

2 Throughout this chapter, I rely on B.B. Warfield's outline of chapter one of WCF. See B.B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981 reprint), 191-92.

*will, which is necessary unto Salvation. (c) Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that His will unto his Church; and afterward for the better preserving, and propagating of the Truth, and for the more sure Establishment, and Comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the World, to commit the same wholly unto (d) writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of Gods revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.*³

a 2 Tim. 3.15,16,17. Isa. 8.20. Luk. 16.29,31. Eph. 2.20.

b Rom. 1.19,20,21. &c. ch 2.14,15. Psal. 19.1,2,3.

c Heb. 1.1.

d Pro. 22.19,20,21. Rom. 15.4. 2 Pet. 1.19,20.

The first part of the initial sentence of this paragraph, *the Holy Scripture... obedience*, is not found in WCF or Savoy and has been added by the Baptists. While they may have simply wished to fortify their statement on Scripture, there are at least three possible reasons for the addition, although each may have together contributed to the desire to begin the Confession with these words. The first occasion has reference to the Quakers. Michael A. G. Haykin has said, “It is very probable that this strengthening of the statement on Scripture grew out of the Particular Baptist concern with the Quakers”⁴ Robert Oliver states that the influential Broadmead Church in Bristol “lost a quarter of its members to the Quakers” in the mid-1650s.⁵ In the manuscript records of the Petty France Church we find this entry for 8 October 1676, ten months before the Confession is first mentioned in the same book:

Mrs. Hattam was cut off from this congregation for forsaking the assembly of this and all other churches of Christ, and closing in with and cleaving to the Quakers: of whose evils she had often been admonished, both by the elders, brethren, and also appointment of the congregation, who divers times sent messengers to

3 The text of the Confession used throughout is based on *A Confession of Faith. Put forth by the Elders and Brethren of Many Congregations of Christians (baptized upon Profession of their Faith) in London and the Country* (Printed in the Year, 1677).

4 Michael A.G. Haykin, *The 1689 Confession: A Tercentennial Appreciation*, unpublished paper dated June 26, 1990, 12.

5 Robert G. Oliver, *Baptist Confession Making 1644 and 1689*, unpublished paper presented to the Strict Baptist Historical Society, March 1989, 12. In 1657, Robert Purnell, elder in the Broadmead, Bristol, church published *The Church of Christ in Bristol Recovering Her Vail* (London: Thomas Brewster) as part of a controversy with Quakers that had erupted in his church. Dennis Hollister, an elder, had abandoned the church to go off to the Quakers, taking many with him.

endeavor the reclaiming of her, but she neglected, and refused to hear them and therefore was she thus proceeded against according to the rule of Christ.⁶

Such inroads would certainly influence the Baptists as they prepared a new confession of faith. An opening sentence asserting the foundational role of Scripture in the church would immediately alert readers to the Baptist churches' commitment to the centrality of Scripture.

The second factor which may have contributed to the change was the fear of Roman Catholicism. Charles II issued a Declaration of Indulgence in March 1672 granting a certain amount of freedom to religious dissenters, but also allowing Roman Catholics to gather for worship in private homes. This lifting of the proscription against Roman Catholics was not happily received by the dissenters, who feared that the benefits of the Reformation might be slowly slipping away. Many of these Baptists knew of the struggles of Protestants in Romanist countries such as France and did not want to find themselves in a similar situation. As such, it was fitting to strengthen their statement to speak of the exclusive rule of faith, which is the Scripture. This is not to say that a supplement such as this would prevent the political return of the power of the Roman church, but rather that such a return would diminish the place of Scripture in English theology.⁷

A third element which may have contributed to the change was the theological argumentation of paedobaptist theologians. Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, in their book *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*, describe an intriguing line of reasoning put forward by Cornelius Burges, an important member of the Westminster Assembly. They state, "Cornelius Burges used the covenant theme polemically against the Anabaptists" Burgess argued that the broad analogy of Scripture supports paedobaptism and that it is permitted "notwithstanding that no text of Scripture enjoyne it in so many words."⁸ It is very possible that the Baptist response to this line of argument was to fortify their Confession by adding these words. In light of the modification made in 1.6 (see below), this is perhaps the most likely reason for the addition here. Having said this, any or all these factors may have led to the desire to begin their document with

6 Petty France *CMB*, October 1676.

7 Benjamin Keach suggests this when he says, "If the Scriptures be not the Word of God, then God hath left us no certain Rule at all, either of Faith or Practice; nor is there any way for us to know Truth from Error. The Papists say, the Church is the Rule." Benjamin Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd*, (London: William Marshall, 1701), 4:113.

8 Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper, 1979), 215.

these notable words. The rest of the paragraph is identical to both the Savoy Declaration and the Westminster Confession of Faith.

It is useful to note that this first sentence incorporates ideas contained in the second and third questions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q. What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

A. The Word of God (which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament) is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

Q. What do the Scriptures principally teach?

A. The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.⁹

These two questions and their answers provide a backdrop to the Baptist addition. A high view of the nature of Scripture was a commonplace among the English theologians. Certainly, the prominence given to this phrase, on the very threshold of the Confession, demonstrates its importance.

The basic teaching of the statement is this: *The Holy Scripture is the . . . rule*. But what does this mean? The sentence should be read something like this:

sufficient knowledge

The Holy Scripture is the only certain rule of all saving faith

and infallible and obedience.

The *rule* is Scripture, and Scripture is the rule. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives some help in understanding the choice of this word: “a standard of discrimination or estimation; a criterion, test, canon.”¹⁰ The Scriptures are a judge, a standard, a criterion. Thomas Watson said, “The Word is a rule of faith, a canon to direct our lives.... The Scripture is a full and perfect canon, containing in it all things necessary to salvation.”¹¹ They speak of life, and in doing so, give authoritative wisdom. They have a special right and serve as the highest test for human behavior. Notice how the word is used elsewhere in 2LCF:

1.2 All which are given by the inspiration of God, to be the *rule* of faith and life

⁹ *The Westminster Standards: An Original Facsimile*, Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1997 facsimile reprint of 1648 edition., spelling updated.

¹⁰ *OED*, s.v. “rule.”

¹¹ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Practical Divinity*, (London: 1692), 15.

19.2 The same law that was first written in the heart of man continued to be a perfect *rule* of righteousness after the fall.

19.6 Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned, yet it is of great use to them as well as to others, in that, as a *rule* of life, informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them, to walk accordingly.

26.12 As all believers are bound to join themselves to particular churches, when and where they have opportunity so to do, so all that are admitted unto the privileges of a church are also under the censures and government thereof, according to the *rule* of Christ.

27.2 the *rule* of the gospel

Appendix, first sentence: Whosoever reads and impartially considers what we have in our forgoing confession declared may readily perceive that we do not only concenter with all other true Christians on the Word of God (revealed in the Scriptures of truth) as the foundation and *rule* of our faith and worship.

Nehemiah Coxe, in an ordination sermon, states, “The wisdom of Christ saw it best to leave the churches to the Rule of his Written Word.”¹² Clearly, the language means that the Scriptures are the standard for Christians. But notice that *rule* is modified by four adjectives: *only*, *sufficient*, *certain*, and *infallible*. Each of these deserves examination.

Only. This adjective modifies all three of those that follow: *only sufficient*, *only certain*, *only infallible*. It asserts a unique status for the Scriptures. In this chapter of the Confession, several potential modes of revelation recognized by different traditions are mentioned, and this word certainly anticipates each of them. They are: general revelation, personal revelation, the Apocrypha, new revelations of the Spirit, traditions of men, and private spirits. Likewise, in subsequent Confessional chapters, other possible modes of revelation are mentioned, including *imaginings and devices of men* and *suggestions of Satan* in 22.1. None of these can have the status of Scripture. The word *only* emphasizes the unique nature of the Scriptures. There are no other writings, or dreams, or a light within each person that can claim to have the religious authority belonging to Scripture.

12 N[ehemiah] C[oxe], *A Sermon at the Ordinatio[n] [sic] of an Elder and Deacons in a Baptized Congregation in London* (London: 1681), 17.

Sufficient. This term implies that Scripture includes every necessary teaching for humanity's saving knowledge, saving faith, and obedience. There are other forms of revelation, but they are insufficient. There is, for example, the light of nature. Likewise, there are the works of creation and providence. But here at the outset is an assertion that these things, in and of themselves, do not and cannot reveal to men what they need for saving knowledge, saving faith, and obedience. The term *sufficient* is defined in paragraph six of this first chapter: *The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men.*

Certain. L. Russ Bush and Tom Nettles state, "Those things declared in Scripture are found to occur or to have occurred exactly as represented."¹³ OED suggests several senses for this word: "1. Determined, fixed, settled; not variable or fluctuating; unailing; 2. Sure, unerring, not liable to fail; to be depended upon; wholly trustworthy or reliable; 3. Established as a truth or fact to be absolutely received, depended, or relied upon; not to be doubted, disputed, or called into question; indubitable, sure."¹⁴ Bush and Nettles again:

None of the statements of Scripture fails to represent reality accurately. This is the same idea that is properly conveyed by the word 'inerrant' as it is used in scholarly evangelical discussions today. 'Certain' refers only to the character of what is actually written. It affirms that nothing misleading or erroneous exists in Scripture.¹⁵

The term *certain* refers to that which is sure. When seeking to describe the content of the knowledge God possesses, the Confession states in 2.2, *His knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent or uncertain.* This negation helps to define the affirmation of this paragraph's first sentence. Scripture is certain in that it is a faithful record of all that God chose to reveal. This is undoubtedly the meaning of the word as written by the Particular Baptists. Scripture is certain; i.e., it is inerrant.

Infallible. The fourth term, *infallible*, is of great importance. William Estep points out that "it was . . . the first time in any Baptist Confession that the Bible was declared 'infallible.'"¹⁶ Haykin states,

13 L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 49.

14 OED, s.v. "certain."

15 Bush and Nettles, *Baptists*, 49.

16 William R. Estep, "Biblical Authority in Baptist Confessions of Faith, 1610-1963," in *The*