

First Presbyterian Church of Dunellen
Congregational Forum #1 – The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture
January 22, 2012

The Confessions on the Inspiration and Authority of Scripture:

The Scot's Confession

3.19-As we believe and confess the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God, so do we affirm and avow their authority to be from God, and not to depend on men or angels. We affirm, therefore, that those who say the Scriptures have no other authority save that which they have received from the Kirk are blasphemous against God and injurious to the true Kirk, which always hears and obeys the voice of her own Spouse and Pastor, but takes not upon her to be mistress over the same.

Second Helvetic Confession

5.001-CANONICAL SCRIPTURE. We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.

5.003-SCRIPTURE TEACHES FULLY ALL GODLINESS. We judge, therefore, that from these Scriptures are to be derived true wisdom and godliness, the reformation and government of churches; as also instruction in all duties of piety; and, to be short, the confirmation of doctrines, and the rejection of all errors, moreover, all exhortations according to that word of the apostle, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof," etc. (II Tim. 3:16–17). Again, "I am writing these instructions to you," says the apostle to Timothy, "so that you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God," etc. (I Tim. 3:14–15).

SCRIPTURE IS THE WORD OF GOD. Again, the selfsame apostle to the Thessalonians: "When," says he, "you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God," etc. (I Thess.2:13.) For the Lord himself has said in the Gospel, "It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of my Father speaking through you"; therefore "he who hears you hears me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Matt. 10:20; Luke 10:16; John 13:20).

5.010-THE TRUE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE. The apostle Peter has said that the Holy Scriptures are not of private interpretation (II Peter 1:20), and thus we do not allow all possible interpretations. Nor consequently do we acknowledge as the true or genuine interpretation of the Scriptures what is called the conception of the Roman Church, that is, what the defenders of the Roman Church plainly maintain should be thrust upon all for acceptance. But we hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages) and which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and man's salvation.

The Westminster Confession of Faith

6.006-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.

6.009-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 may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

The Larger Catechism

7.113-Question #3: What is the Word of God?

Answer: The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.

7.114-Question #4: How doth it appear that the Scriptures are the Word of God?

Answer: The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the Word of God, by their majesty and purity; by the consent of all the parts, and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God; by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation. But the Spirit of God, bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very word of God.

The Shorter Catechism

7.003-Question #3: What do the Scriptures principally teach?

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

The Confession of 1967

9.27-9.30-The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. The church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.

The New Testament is the recorded testimony of apostles to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the Church. The Old Testament bears witness to God's faithfulness in his covenant with Israel and points the way to the fulfillment of his purpose in Christ. The Old Testament is indispensable to understanding the New, and is not itself fully understood without the New.

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding.

As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture. God's word is spoken to his church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction.

A Brief Statement of Faith

52, 58-64: we trust in God the Holy Spirit... The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles, rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.

PC USA History on the Inspiration & Authority of Scripture

The Adopting Act regularized confessional standards, but it did not require adherence to every confessional articulation. "Essential and necessary articles" were not identified. The Adopting Act was refined in 1758 at the repair of the Old Side/New Side schism:

1. With respect to any action deemed essential and necessary by the church, "every member shall actively concur . . . or passively submit . . . or peaceably withdraw."
2. It became a censurable offense irresponsibly to accuse other ministers.
3. Presbyteries were to examine candidates on "religious experience" as well as doctrine.
4. Five questions were to be asked at ordinations and installations, including, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the confession of faith of this church as contained in the system of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures?" The "system of doctrine" was interpreted in the spirit of "essential and necessary."

The 1910 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America declared that the Adopting Act of 1729 called upon judicatories to determine which articles of faith are "essential and necessary." The assembly then identified five doctrines as "essential" (although the assembly added, "others are equally so.") (1) inerrancy of Scripture, (2) virgin birth, (3) sacrificial atonement, (4) bodily resurrection, (5) Christ's miracles.

Although the 1910 deliverance was challenged repeatedly, it was not repealed. Following the 1923 General Assembly, and in reaction against the 1910/1916/1923 doctrinal deliverance, more than 1,200 ministers signed the "Auburn Affirmation" declaring "We all hold most earnestly to these great facts and doctrines... Some of us regard the particular themes contained in the deliverance of the General Assembly of 1923 as satisfactory explanations of these facts and doctrines. But we are united in believing that these are not the only themes allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines of our religion, and that all who hold to these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of our confidence and fellowship."

The issue was set: narrowly defined confessional subscription or broadly defined confessional subscription. The question was not whether confessional subscription was required, but the specific nature of that confessional subscription.

The matter was referred to a special commission that reported in 1926 and 1927. The upshot of the special commission's report, adopted by the 1927 General Assembly, was that:

1. The General Assembly does not have the constitutional power to give binding definition to the church's essential faith. By denying that the assembly has the right to define authoritatively the "essentials" of the church's faith, the commission eliminated the five points as a source of controversy.
2. While a measure of tolerance was embedded in the church, it was made clear that the church, and not the individual, must decide the limits of tolerated diversity, "either generally, by amendment to the constitution, or particularly, by Presbyterianial authority."

The church has decided limits generally, by amending the constitution to create The Book of Confessions, and particularly, by the continuing examination for ordination of candidates and for reception into membership of ministers. To this end, it must be acknowledged that in ordination the presbytery has historically demonstrated its power and responsibility in determining confirmation with the church's theology.

The PC USA on Scripture in Recent History

PUP Report pg. 21, approved by the 2006 General Assembly

“In order to allow the Scriptures to speak to us clearly and fully, the Reformed approach continues to embrace a variety of models of biblical authority and interpretation, each highlighting values that Presbyterians have historically held to be important.”

What are the general views on Scripture in the PC USA today (from the document *Biblical Authority and Interpretation*, 1982)?

1. The Bible, though written by individuals, has been so controlled by the Holy Spirit that it is without error in all it teaches in matters of science and history, as well as in matters of theology. 14%
2. The Bible, though written by individuals and reflecting their personalities, has been so controlled by the Holy Spirit that it is trustworthy in all it teaches in matters of theology and ethics, but not necessarily in matters of science and history. 23%
3. All of the Bible is both the inspired Word of God and at the same time a thoroughly human document. 48%
4. Portions of the Bible, including some of its theological and ethical positions, may not be the inspired Word of God. 11%
5. The Bible is merely a record of the moral and religious experiences of Hebrews and Christians. 4%

33% of the respondents did not know what the Reformed position on the inspiration of Scripture is.

From the Presbyterian Panel summary report on religious demographics within our denomination, 2009:

Prayer and Bible Reading

- Less than half of members (37%) and elders (49%) “read the Bible privately” at least “weekly.” Half of pastors (52%) and a third of specialized clergy (33%) do so “daily” or “almost daily.”
- Few panelists (members, 16%; elders, 16%; pastors, 5%; specialized clergy, 3%) believe that “the Bible is . . . to be taken literally, word for word.” Instead, most panelists believe that the Bible should be interpreted in light of either “its historical and cultural context” (46%; 51%; 61%; 63%) or “its historical context and the church’s teachings” (34%; 32%; 34%; 33%).

Table 2. View of the Bible

Members, Elders, Pastors, Specialized Clergy

The Bible:

- is the word of God, to be taken literally, word for word 16% 16% 5% 3%
- is the word of God, to be interpreted in the light of its historical and cultural context
 - 46% 51% 61% 63%
- is the word of God, to be interpreted in the light of its historical context and Church teachings ... 34% 32% 34% 33%
- is not the word of God ... 4% 2% 1% 1%

Passages Where the Bible Attests to Itself

Old Testament

2 Samuel 22:31-32 and Psalm 18:30-31- As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him. For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God?

Proverbs 30:5-6-Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.

Psalm 19:7-10-The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.

Psalm 33:4-For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.

Psalm 119 in its entirety is a lengthy poem on the majesty and perfection of the Lord's Word.

Isaiah 40:6-8-A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

New Testament

Matthew 4:4-Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

Matthew 5:18-I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

1 Corinthians 14:36-37-Did the Word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.

Ephesians 6:17-Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

Hebrews 4:12- For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

2 Timothy 3:16-17-All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

1 Peter 1:24-25- For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.

Statement on Scripture Passed by Our Session

The Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. The Holy Spirit spoke through its authors and witnesses to us today that it is indeed and in truth the very Word of God, God's gift to the world and guide for His people.

Essential Tenets 2007

In short what we have on the question of Scripture is this:

- Different views on its inspiration-where did Scripture originate, who inspired it and by what means?
- Different views on its authority-the answers one provides to the questions above will color the level of authority that one ascribes to the Scriptures.

As a result of the other two, we have vastly different views on its interpretation.

- The PC USA has deliberately, consistently, and thoroughly established a position on this subject that can be articulated in this way: we will allow all views on what Scripture is and what its authority is so long as the examining body thinks those views remain within the scope our ordination vows and the person making them can say as much in good conscience.
- What we believe about Scripture in the PC USA is not considered to be an essential by General Assembly ruling.