

The Rule of Faith:

A Confessional
Introduction to the
Scriptures

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An Exposition & Application of Chapter 1 of the
Second London Confession

This booklet is comprised of a series of letters from the pastor, written by Pastor Jonathan to Lake Wylie Baptist Church. They have been slightly edited to produce this resource.

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WHAT IS A BAPTIST?

INTRODUCING THE LONDON CONFSSION OF FAITH

INTRODUCTION

In the last 5 years you've likely noticed that we talk more and more about Christian creeds and confessions in our congregation. We have been reciting the Apostles' Creed weekly for five years in our gathered worship. We also alternate in reciting the Nicene Creed. We've taken an entire year to recite an edited version of the Heidelberg Catechism, and more recently, we taught through the seven ecumenical councils and their associated creeds and confessions in our adult discipleship class.

Today, I'm beginning what will be a long series exposing the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith. I plan to address a paragraph or two of the confession every week until I've worked my way through the entire confession. The confession contains 150 total paragraphs so this series will take some time. The good news is, these expositions will be bite-sized making them perfect for a quick read or listen (on my podcast) while commuting to work or doing the laundry. Today, I will answer two questions: what is a Baptist and what is the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession? (LCF)

WHAT IS A BAPTIST?

Baptists are a denomination of Christians which arose out of congregational churches during the English Reformation in the 17th century. Several pastors, such as John Smyth (c. 1554-1612) and Henry Jacob (1563-1624) desiring greater purity and holiness for the church, began to teach the following doctrines as Scriptural:

Believers' Baptism: Only professing Christians ought to receive baptism, not infants.

Regenerate Church Membership: Only those who evidence conversion may be members of local congregations.

Separation of Church and State: The civil and ecclesiastical authorities are separate spheres. The state ought not wield the keys

of the kingdom, and the church ought not wield the power of the sword.

Liberty of Conscience: Every person has the right to direct access to God. Man is made in God’s image and is responsible to God for his own soul. Christ alone is Lord of the conscience, and therefore Baptists historically defend the right of others to freely accept or reject God without coercion.¹

Baptists are *orthodox*, meaning they are within the broad stream of Nicene Christianity along with Christians around the globe. Baptists are *evangelical*, meaning they hold to justification by faith alone as do other Protestants. Baptists are a *separatist* movement in church history, meaning they shun the interference of the civil authorities and desire the church to be free. Baptists are *conscientiously confessional*. Baptists have always produced confessions to explain their own views and as documents used to preserve and purify their members.²

One such confession is the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith which we turn to now.

WHAT IS THE 1689 SECOND LONDON BAPTIST CONFESSION OF FAITH?

In early autumn of 1689, one hundred and eight English and Welsh Baptist churches were represented in a General Assembly at which thirty-three pastors and messengers signed the document which came to be known as the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith. The Confession, first published in 1677, became the “most important and widely accepted of all Baptist confessions of faith...”³

¹ For a thorough treatment of these distinctives, see *The Baptist Way* by R. Stanton Norman

² These four terms (orthodox, evangelical, separate, and conscientiously confessional) come from Tom Nettles’ masterful work *The Baptists*.

³ James Renihan, *To the Judicious and Impartial Reader: A Contextual-Historical Exposition of the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2022), 1.

The Confession shares intentional friendly commonalities with the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) and the Congregationalist Savoy Declaration (1658). The drafters of the Confessions desired to demonstrate their common descent from the Reformation of the 16th century while explaining their own distinct understanding of covenant theology and the church.

The structure of the Confession can be outlined in four parts:

The confession begins with the doctrine of the Scriptures. We cannot know about any other doctrine without the divine light of Holy Scripture. The Confession then moves to the doctrines of God, His decree, creation, providence, and the fall of man into sin in chapter 6.

Chapters seven through twenty cover the topic of the atonement and its application. Here we learn of God's covenant, Christ the mediator, free will, and other doctrines related to God's covenants.

The third section of the Confession begins in chapter twenty-one and explains how Christians ought to live before the Lord. This section covers subjects such as worship, oaths and vows, marriage, and the church.

Finally, in chapters thirty-one and thirty-two, the confession concludes by instructing us in matters pertaining to the world to come. Here we learn of the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment.

CONCLUSION

I believe the future health of Baptist churches in general, and our Baptist church in particular, requires us to recover conscious confessionalism. Baptists have always been a confessional people, dating back to the first decades of Baptist existence.

Our generation of Baptist Christians is responsible to affirm and defend the faith, to call one another to fellowship and discipline, to properly evaluate and hold ministers accountable for their teaching, and to assure future generations that the church we have received finds her roots in historic, biblically faithful predecessors.

May we do all of that for the glory of Christ and the joy of His Saints.

WHY WE NEED THE BIBLE:

THE NECESSITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

INTRODUCTION

The first chapter of the Second London Confession pertains to the Holy Scriptures. In all, the confession contains ten separate paragraphs which help us understand the nature, scope, transmission and interpretation of the Scriptures. Let's begin by reading paragraph one.

THE 1689 SECOND LONDON CONFESSION OF FAITH

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the 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 inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and His will which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times and in diversified 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 writing; which makes the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now completed.

WHY BEGIN WITH SCRIPTURE?

If you were drafting a confession of faith, which doctrine would you begin with? You may begin with God, known as theology proper. God is the ground of all things and therefore, it might make sense for your confession to start there. You may even consider other doctrines such as the doctrine of Christ, or salvation by faith. Those are all crucial doctrines of the Christian faith, but the framers of the Second London Confession chose to begin with the doctrine of Scripture. Why?

The Confession argues that if we are going to have any knowledge of God sufficient to redeem us, then it must come from God's own special revelation of Himself. In other words, the first paragraph of the Confession argues for the necessity of Scripture.

Scripture is necessary because creation alone cannot give us, "that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation." (LCF 1.1) While creation declares God's existence and our conscience accuses us of guilt, neither of these two witnesses make us wise unto salvation. Creation can tell us that God exists, but it cannot tell us his name, nor does it have the power to change our hearts. In other words, the witness of creation only gives us enough knowledge to condemn us, not to redeem us from our sin.

"Therefore," says the Confession, "it pleased the Lord at sundry (various) times and in diverse manners to reveal himself." (LCF 1.1) We can recall the many ways God specially and specifically reveal Himself and his redemptive plans to his people. God spoke to Noah, (Gen. 6:13), He spoke again from a burning bush to Moses (Ex. 3), he wrote the Ten Commandments with his own finger (Ex. 31:18), and he spoke many times through the Prophets and his own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. All of this, says the Confession, was preserved in the writings of Holy Scripture to accomplish several purposes:

First, the Scriptures preserve God's special revelation. From generation to generation, the church continues to read the same message from the same Bible. Second, because God's special revelation has been written down, it can and ought to be copied, translated, and spread to the ends of the earth. Third, the written Word of God gives the church a sure and comforting establishment. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

The Confession ends by arguing that the Scriptures are the full and final special revelation from God. In other words, Christians need not look for burning bushes or listen for voices in the night. Everything we need to know God, ourselves, and our Savior; everything we need to live our lives to honor the Lord is contained in the written Scriptures. Too many Christians look to Christian movies, TV shows, and even good Christian books for that which only the Scriptures can provide: the actual revelation of God.

Christian, it is crucial that you understand what I am about to say: the Scriptures are not primarily a record of how God revealed himself in the past. They are, first and foremost, divine revelation from God to you right now. 2 Timothy 3:16, a passage I will reference more than once in the coming weeks, says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God.” In other words, the writings themselves are divinely inspired revelation from God to you. Read them as such.

You ought to plan to read through the entire Bible once every year or two. I typically use a plan that has me read through the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice each year. That pace may be too quick for you, but whatever your pace, you need to read the Scriptures daily and systematically rather than occasionally and haphazardly. If you’d like to hear more options about reading the Bible consistently, reach out to me.

THE INFALLIBILITY OF SCRIPTURE

Paragraph one begins by saying the “Holy Scripture is the only... infallible rule of all saving knowledge.” This is the first time the word “infallible” has occurred in a Baptist statement of faith. What does it mean? You may have heard the word inerrant used to describe the fact that the Scriptures contain no errors. The word infallible is an even stronger word than inerrant. To be infallible means the Scriptures cannot err. It’s impossible for the Scriptures to err. Why is that? Because they are the breathed-out Word of God who does not, indeed he cannot, lie. If you would like more information on the doctrine of infallibility and inerrancy, I would encourage you to search for the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. It’s a wonderful overview of what we mean when we say the Scriptures are inerrant and infallible.

CONCLUSION

In our worship services we often sing these lyrics:

*How firm a foundation,
ye saints of the Lord
Is laid for your faith
in his excellent Word
What more can he say
than to you he hath said.*

*To you, who for refuge,
to Jesus have fled?⁴*

My final exhortation to you is this: get a physical copy of the Bible. Digital Bibles are convenient, but they can also distract with apps and notifications. Read your physical Bible every day and fill it with handwritten notes. Then patiently watch as that Bible becomes bedrock beneath your feet.

⁴ How Firm a Foundation, by Robert Keen

WHICH BOOKS?

THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

INTRODUCTION

What constitutes Holy Scripture? Which books belong in the Bible, and which do not? These questions are answered in paragraphs two & three of chapter one of the confession. Today we'll consider paragraph two and the sixty-six books of the Holy Scriptures.

THE 1689 SECOND LONDON CONFSSION OF FAITH (1.2)

Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these,

Of the Old Testament

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I Samuel, II Samuel, I Kings, II Kings, I Chronicles, II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

Of the New Testament

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, The Acts of the Apostles, Paul's Epistle to the Romans, I Corinthians, II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I Thessalonians, II Thessalonians, I Timothy, II Timothy, To Titus, To Philemon, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Epistle of James, The first and second Epistles of Peter, The first, second, and third Epistles of John, The Epistle of Jude, The Revelation.

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

THE CANON

The Confession lists those books which are considered canonical by Christians in the tradition of the Protestant Reformation. These are the sixty-six books we are familiar with in our Bibles at church.

Notice that the Confession equates these sixty-six books with the very Word of God. This list of books is often referred to as the canon of Scripture. The word “canon” derives from a Latin word meaning, “reed” or “rule.” Both Jews and Christians recognize the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Old Testament as canonical, and all Christians recognize the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as canonical. As we will see next week, there is debate amongst Christians over the canonicity of several other books.

The Confession concludes this paragraph by affirming that all sixty-six books are given by divine inspiration. There is no argument given for this assertion because the Confession is not an apologetic or argumentative document, rather it is a statement of shared belief among early English Baptists.

While the canon of the Old Testament is a relatively settled issue, skepticism of the New Testament abounds in our culture. How did we get the New Testament? Who “decided” which books belong in the New Testament? Questions like this swirl on social media today. Thankfully, the church has spent nearly two millennia answering these questions with academic rigor. For now, allow me to give you a very brief and general overview.

Contrary to skeptical influencers & critics, the New Testament canon was not invented centuries after the lifetimes of Christ and the Apostles by power-hungry Roman Emperors and Bishops in clandestine councils. Rather, the New Testament documents were widely circulated and recognized as authoritative by the early church. All of the Apostle Paul’s letters were written within fifteen to thirty years after the resurrection of Christ, and the Gospel of John (likely the final gospel to be written) was authored by AD 95 at the latest. Other non-canonical gospels such as the Gospel of Judas and Thomas were written centuries later.

Reading church fathers such as Eusebius, we learn how discerning the church was as they recognized and collected the individual documents into the larger New Testament. They applied strict criteria to these texts such as:

Apostolicity: Did we receive this document from an Apostle, or someone connected to an Apostle?

Orthodoxy: Does the theological and historical content of the document align with Apostolic doctrine?

Catholicity: Was the document widely recognized as authoritative by the church?

So, you see, the early church exercised careful discernment in affirming which books were to be included in the canon. If a book showed up with the ink still wet, they tossed it. If it didn't accord with the rule of faith, they set it aside. It's crucial to understand that the church did not see themselves as creating the canon so much as they understood themselves to be recognizing the canon. The Scriptures are the Scriptures because they come from God. They are self-authenticating. So, the church didn't "invent" the Scriptures. Rather, they acknowledged what was already true: that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are divinely inspired and thus, already canonical.

God has not given us a few phrases, or just one book. He has given us a library of knowledge concerning him and his purposes. The famed Princeton professor, Benjamin Warfield put it like this:

“On first throwing open this wonderful volume we are struck immediately with the fact that it is not a book, but rather a congeries of books. No less than sixty-six separate books, one of which consists itself of one hundred and fifty separate compositions, immediately stare us in the face. These treatises come from the hands of at least thirty distinct writers, scattered over a period of some fifteen hundred years, and embrace specimens of nearly every kind of writing known among men. Histories, codes of law, ethical maxims, philosophical treatises, discourses, dramas, songs, hymns, epics, biographies, letters both official and personal, [prophecies], —every kind of composition known beneath heaven seems gathered here in one volume.”⁵

⁵ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Vol. 1, Revelation and Inspiration (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 436)

We could easily spend weeks thinking and learning more about the canon of Scripture. Church history, biblical languages, archaeology and even theology all weave together as we study the process by which the church arrived at the final recognized shape of the Scriptures. If you are interested in learning more, I recommend the ministry of Wesley Huff for a popular audience, as well as the academic writings of Michael Kruger and Daniel Wallace.

I want to end today's letter by quoting Psalm 138:2, which says:

I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.

APOCRYPHA:

EXCLUDED FROM THE CANON

INTRODUCTION

As we continue our consideration of the canon of Scripture from last week, we come to paragraph three of chapter one of the Second London Confession which addresses the canonicity of the Apocrypha.

THE 1689 SECOND LONDON CONFSSION OF FAITH (1.3)

The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon or rule of the Scripture, and, therefore, are of no authority to the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved or made use of than other human writings.

WHAT IS THE APOCRYPHA?

Before we answer that question, I want to draw your attention to Romans 3:2 which says, “*To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.*” The framers of the London Confession cite this verse as a proof text for their paragraph rejecting the Apocrypha as canonical. In other words, the authors of the Confession rejected the Apocrypha because the Jews did not consider the Apocrypha to be canonical or coordinate with the rest of the Old Testament.

But what is the Apocrypha? The word Apocrypha is a classical Greek word that originally referred to something “hard to understand,” or “hidden.” By the time of the Reformation, the word had become a proper name for a group of fourteen (or fifteen) books written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100; eleven of which are considered canonical by the Roman Catholic Church. You may be familiar with the names of several Apocryphal books such as, *1 & 2 Maccabees*, or *The Wisdom of Solomon*. While the Apocrypha is absent from the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament, it is present in a list known as the “Alexandrian Canon” which allegedly originated in Egypt.

It's important to know that while the New Testament authors quote from other extra-biblical material, neither Jesus nor the authors of

the New Testament ever quote from the Apocrypha. In fact, when Jesus spoke of the Old Testament canon in Luke 24:44, he said this:

“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.”

Jesus affirmed the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament which divided the Scriptures into three categories: the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Nevi'im) and Psalms/Writings (Ketuvim). Christ himself, when he had the opportunity to affirm the Apocrypha as canonical, omitted it.

Neither the Jewish philosopher, Philo, nor the historian, Josephus, considered the apocryphal books canonical. None of the ecumenical councils of the church recognized the Apocrypha as canonical, and several voices in the early church, such as Origen and Athanasius rejected the Apocrypha.

Jerome (AD 340-420) translated the Bible into Latin at the end of the 4th century, and after his death, Latin translations of the Apocrypha were inserted into the Vulgate. While there were frequent challenges to the canonicity of the Apocrypha through the Middle Ages (AD 450 – 1500) a true mass controversy regarding the Apocrypha began in during the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformers committed themselves to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, that Scripture alone is our ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice. Their commitment to this principle led them to their initial suspicion and ultimate rejection of the Apocrypha as canonical. So, what made them suspicious? First, several books in the Apocrypha contradict the doctrine of the Old and New Testament. For instance, 2 Maccabees 12 argues for prayers for the dead, from which the Roman Catholic Church developed its doctrine of purgatory. Tobit 12 teaches justification by works. Aside from theological contradiction, the apocryphal books were not authored by recognized prophets of God to Israel, and they had not been accepted by God's people. Several of the books contain historical or chronological errors. As the Reformers began translating the Scriptures from the original languages into the common languages of the people, the Bibles they produced removed the Apocrypha. In response, the Roman Catholic Church,

at the Council of Trent (1546) affirmed eleven apocryphal books as fully canonical.

During the 17th century in England, debates shifted back and forth over the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the Church of England until the 1644 Long Parliament ruled that the Apocrypha should no longer be read in the liturgies of the church. Subsequently, the Westminster Confession of Faith included only the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testament as Holy Scripture as did the English Particular Baptists in the Second London Confession.

SHOULD WE READ THE APOCRYPHA?

While we agree with the Jews of antiquity, the Reformers, and the Puritans that the Apocrypha does not meet the criteria for canonicity, does that mean we shouldn't read them at all? I'll lay my cards on the table and tell you that I have never personally read all of the Apocrypha, and the only time I have read portions is when I have to do research. While some Christians have read them for general wisdom or to learn about the history of the Jews in the Intertestamental Period, I believe there are far better books we could spend our time reading. First, and obviously, you ought to read Scripture every day. Beyond Scripture, read solid books that help explain Scripture. Read Puritans like Thomas Watson and John Bunyan. Read Calvin's Institutes or Stephen Charnock's Existence and Attributes of God. Then, if you do get a little curious, dip into the Apocrypha. Measure what it says against Scripture.

If you are interested in learning more about the doctrine of Scripture, or the Bible's composition, transmission, and canonization, I'd like to recommend a few resources:

For an easy to read, yet comprehensive introduction, I recommend *A General Introduction to the Bible* by Norman Geisler and William Nix. Robert Saucy's book, *Scripture*, is a wonderful theology of Scripture that anyone can and should read. For a robust theology of the Bible, B.B. Warfield's *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* is essential. Matthew Barrett has written a wonderful volume on the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* entitled *God's Word Alone*. And I would be remiss if I did not also mention *Baptists and the Bible* by L. Russ Bush and Tom Nettles which provides a detailed account of Baptist attitudes toward the doctrines of

inerrancy and infallibility. Finally, if you'd prefer a book that is more devotional in nature, John Piper's *A Peculiar Glory* helps us see that while it is good to defend the canon, in reality God's Word attests to its own glory and truth.

May you cherish the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testament, reading them as they are meant to be read: as God's inerrant, sufficient, and authoritative self-revelation to his church.

FROM GOD, NOT MAN: THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, Dr. Ivan Spencer, one of my professors in college, asked me to read a book with him outside of class. The book was *The Universe Next Door* by James Sire which introduced me to the idea of “worldview.” In the book, Sire listed seven questions that, when answered, would reveal a person’s deepest, most closely held views on the world and reality. “Why is it possible to know anything at all?” “How do we know what is right and wrong?” “What is prime reality?” Sire helped me understand that, whether or not we realize it, we all have fundamental presuppositions about existence, and those basic assumptions shape how we think, feel, and behave. So, ask yourself a few questions. What is really real? What is the authority from which all others derive their own authority? What is the truth against which all other claims must be measured? These questions cut down to the root of all our other beliefs, and it’s crucial we understand how to answer them.

THE 1689 SECOND LONDON CONFESSION OF FAITH (1.4, 5)

Paragraph 4

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, depends not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.

Paragraph 5

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church of God to a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scriptures; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, and the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, and many other incomparable excellencies, and entire perfections thereof, are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the

infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

What makes the Bible an authoritative book? The Confession argues that the Bible does not receive its authority from men or the church. Rather, the Confession makes a logical argument: the authority of the Bible rests upon the authority of its author, God. In other words, if God possesses authority, and if the Bible is the very Word of God, then the Bible also possesses authority. If God cannot lie, then neither can his Word. Whether or not one believes God to be the author of the Scriptures does not change its authority.

Here the Confession cites several proof texts from Scripture which are worth noting.

2 Timothy 3:16

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness

Let's break that verse down into smaller bits. The Greek word for Scripture is *graphe* which means "writings." Scripture claims that the original writings of Scripture are the locus of divine inspiration. And what is divine inspiration? This verse teaches that God breathed out the Scriptures. Though the Scriptures were written by men, God is their ultimate author. And Scripture accounts for this dual authorship in 2 Peter 1:22, 21.

knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The Bible recognizes its own dual authorship. So, did men write the Bible? Yes. Did God write the Bible? Yes. It simply will not do to argue that the Bible contains error because humans wrote it, for the Holy Spirit carried them in the task.

The 2 Timothy passage begins with the word “all.” All the writings of Scripture are God-breathed. You may have heard the term “Verbal Plenary Inspiration.” Verbal means we believe the words of Scripture to be breathed out by God. This is why we preach expositionally and seek to understand the books, paragraphs, sentences, words, grammar, and syntax of the Bible. Plenary means “all.” All of the words of Scripture, not just some of them are divinely inspired.

Now, I know what you are thinking: “Jonathan, you say the Bible is authoritative because the Bible says it’s authoritative. You’re arguing in a circle! You’ve snuck your conclusion into your arguments!” Well, that’s actually not what I’ve argued. I’ve argued the Bible’s authority rests on God’s authority.

If you combine the logic of paragraph four and five you see the beauty of the Confession’s argument. Paragraph four argues that the Bible’s authority rests on God as its author, not men or the church. In other words, objectively, if the Bible is the Word of God, then it’s authoritative. Paragraph five argues that we, as individuals, may be moved (subjectively) to believe in the authority of the Bible by the testimony of the church, or the clarity, beauty, and historicity of the Bible, but our full persuasion of the authority of Scripture comes by the work of the Spirit. In other words, our historical verification of the content of Scripture does not grant authority, it only evidences the authority already contained in Scripture. As Sam Waldron says, “If the Bible as God’s voice from heaven does not attest itself, no amount of voices from heaven will ever be sufficient to attest it.”⁶

The authors of the Confession intentionally begin by affirming the Scriptures as the ultimate and final authority concerning the faith and doctrine. They understood that while creeds and confessions are important and helpful, they are nonetheless subordinate to the authority of Scripture. Therefore, the Bible is the ruling rule and confessions are the rules which are ruled by the Bible. The Bible possesses divine and absolute authority while the confession only possesses relative and ecclesiastical authority.

⁶ Sam Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 51.

By opening the Confession with a statement of the Bible's authority, the authors prepare us for a Biblically rich statement of all other doctrines to follow. They are signaling to us their commitment to derive all subsequent teaching from their interpretation of the Word of God and we will be responsible to read what they have written and compare it with the light of Holy Scripture. The Confession is authoritative only to the degree that it accurately reflects and summarizes the teaching of Scripture. So, as we read the Confession, may we constantly go back to the fundamental authority in matters of doctrine: the very Word of God.

ALL WE NEED:
THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

THE 1689 SECOND LONDON CONFESSION OF FAITH (1.6)

Paragraph 6

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. 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 SUFFICIENCY OF THE SCRIPTURES

The Word of God is primarily concerned with God's glory and man's salvation, and Scripture sufficiently supplies all that is necessary for us to pursue those ends. This is what we mean by the sufficiency of Scripture. The Bible does not teach us how to roof a house or perform in a Shakespearean play. It does not contain instructions for rebuilding carburetors or baking croissants, though it's teaching and principles guide us even in these areas. In other words, though the Scriptures do not contain recipes for bakers, the Scriptures do teach the baker the principles for working heartily and doing one's work as unto the Lord.

There is no other revelation from God that you need in order to glorify God, be saved, and live a life of faith and obedience. Those of you who know me well know that I love books. My study at the church has walls full of books, and I have been enriched by each one. I constantly give books away and encourage the reading of good books. Our church has a book stall which I stock with reliable and trustworthy books. But none of those books hold a candle to the

authority, the necessity, the clarity, and the sufficiency of the Bible to guide our lives to the Lord.

EXPRESS & DERIVED TEACHING

The confession states that the whole counsel of God is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture. What does that mean? Somethings in the Bible are expressly or explicitly taught. A good example would be that God is one (Deut. 6:4) or that murder is wrong (Ex. 20:13). Other truths are implicit. The Westminster Confession of Faith put it this way:

*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***

We might call this “derived” teaching. A good example here would be the doctrine of the Trinity. You can't find the word “Trinity” expressly stated, but the clear inference of Scripture is that the one God subsists eternally in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit.

Another example would be that the church ought to worship on the first day of the week, Sunday. No verse of Scripture expressly states that the church must worship on Sunday. Nonetheless, we can make a solid Biblical argument, from the resurrection of Christ as well as the early church's pattern of meeting on Sunday and referring to it as the “Lord's Day,” that we ought to meet on the Christian Sabbath for worship.

THE ILLUMINATION OF THE SPIRIT

Next, the confession teaches that the Spirit of God must illuminate the Scriptures so that we might understand them. This does not mean unbelievers are incapable of understanding any of the content of the Scriptures. If that was the case, there would be no point in reading the Scriptures to them. It does mean that without the illumination of the Spirit, no one will understand the Scripture to be the very Word of God, much less obey the Word. The Spirit imparts faith through the preaching of the Scriptures (Rom. 10:17), and faith then perceives that the Scriptures are indeed the Word of God.

THE LIGHT OF NATURE & CHRISTIAN PRUDENCE

Paragraph six ends by reminding us that Scripture is not opposed to common sense, natural reason, or Christian wisdom. There are a variety of circumstantial details about the church and worship that God does not prescribe in the Scriptures. Therefore, they are left to Godly wisdom and common sense.

For example, while the Scriptures teach that the church ought to gather on Sunday for worship, the Scriptures never prescribe the time the church must gather, how long the service must last, or whether the church must gather in a home or a purpose-built sanctuary. While the Scriptures tell us to preach, pray, sing, observe the sacraments, and give offerings, they never prescribe the order of our liturgy. Should a church have pews or chairs? Should we use microphones and projectors, or should we use hymnals? Should the congregation sit or stand during Scripture reading? I would argue that all of these are left to the conscience and wisdom of autonomous churches under the leadership of elders.

CONCLUSION

We are blessed with so many resources. From books and podcasts to video series and websites, the Lord has given us so many opportunities to learn from wonderful teachers and writers. In the midst of all this blessing, let's not forget what is most important for our spiritual life and health: the Scriptures. Christian, you ought to read the Bible every single day. There are plenty of good Bible reading plans. You need not read it all in one year, but you should make the daily habit of scriptural intake a priority in your life.

A LAMP UNTO MY FEET:

THE CLARITY & TRANSMISSION OF SCRIPTURE

INTRODUCTION

As a Pastor, I feel an incredible responsibility not just to explain the Bible to others, but to help them understand the Bible for themselves. Years ago, I had coffee with a prospective church member who was a Christian, yet he confessed to me, “Jonathan, I’m biblically illiterate.” And he was. At that time, he did not know Adam from Absalom.

Over the next 3 years I watched as he not only attended worship every week in my church, but he also read the Bible constantly on his own time. When he passed away a year ago, I thumbed through his copy of the Scriptures. The margins were full of handwritten notes. Underlines and highlights filled the pages. While I’m sure my preaching helped him, he had taught himself the Bible. I share that story because, for many new Christians, the Bible is a big intimidating book. They don’t know what they will find when they open it, and they aren’t sure they’ll even be able to understand it. Let me assure you: the Bible is for you. God has given His Word to you, and He has authored it so that you can read it and understand.

THE 1689 SECOND LONDON CONFSSION OF FAITH (1.7, 8)

Paragraph 7

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all;¹² yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed 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 ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them.

Paragraph 8

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and by His singular

care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal to them. But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have a right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded in the fear of God to read, and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner, and through patience and comfort of the Scriptures may have hope.

THE CLARITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

Paragraph seven of the Confession concerns the clarity of the Scriptures. Another word theologians like to use is perspicuity. The Reformer, Martin Luther, argued that every believer serves as his own priest before the Lord. Instead of needing an expert in the clergy to tell him what the Bible means, every believer should read the Bible for himself. This is made possible because God has ensured the clarity of his Word. Psalm 19:7 says, “the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.” God’s desire is that his Word would enlighten and make wise even the simplest of people.

We can understand the Bible because it’s written. Words have meaning. Genre and grammar and context control and contain meaning. Thank God that we get to read a text instead of look at a picture to discern His will for our life.

You can read the Bible and learn that God is holy, man is sinful, Jesus Christ is the Savior, and that you are to believe in him for salvation. Beyond that, the Bible clearly teaches the doctrines of God, the Trinity, the divinity of the Son, justification by faith alone, the goodness of God’s law and a host of other doctrines.

The Confession admits that not all Scripture is equally clear. All things in Scripture are not plain in themselves. The Scriptures themselves also admit that some parts are harder to understand. Speaking of the letters of the Apostle Paul, Peter writes that “There are some things in them that are hard to understand.” (2 Peter 3:16) I’m thankful that even Peter found certain passages confusing at times.

Anyone who has ever tried reading Ezekiel or Genesis 6 have likely scratched their heads and wondered what was going on. Or perhaps you've read 1 Corinthians 15:29 and wondered what Paul meant when he preached against the "baptism for the dead". Nonetheless, everything we need to be saved is clearly taught and explained in the Bible. You don't need a seminary degree to understand the Bible. I've often said I would trust a layperson in my church who reads their Bible every day to accurately interpret the Bible, over most popular preachers online.

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE SCRIPTURES

Paragraph eight begins by addressing the transmission of the Scriptures. In other words, it answers the question of how the Scriptures came to us. They were written in the original languages of primarily Hebrew and Greek but were then providentially kept pure in all ages as copies were made. I can't spend too much time here, but there is a tremendous wealth of material on the transmission of the Scripture both online and in print. Suffice it to say, the Bible is the best attested document of antiquity, and it isn't even close. If the field of textual criticism interests you, look into the work of Wesley Huff, Daniel Wallace, and Michael Kruger.

The Scriptures were copied far and wide. We are able to trace the spread of those copies with incredible accuracy. We have noted where there have been variations in copies (which are honestly minimal and virtually insubstantial) and can be fully confident that our modern Bibles contain the words God desires for us to have.

THE TRANSLATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

Lastly, paragraph eight covers the translation of the Bible into other languages. Because God purposes to save men and women from every nation, he also intends for His Word to be translated into their languages. There is no prohibition in the Bible against translating its words into English, German, or Hindi. When we read our English copies of the Bible, we are the recipients of a tremendous blessing. Other Christians have taken incredible care and time to translate the Word of God for us, and we ought to treasure it as such.

THE LAST WORD:

THE SCRIPTURE AS INTERPRETIVE RULE & JUDGE

INTRODUCTION

As we come to the end of the first chapter of the London Confession, the final two paragraphs circle back to the question of authority, particularly as it relates to the interpretation of the Scriptures as well as the judgment of all other councils, opinions, and teachings of men. In other words, what is the highest authority in Biblical interpretation and to what must we compare all human wisdom and knowledge?

THE 1689 SECOND LONDON CONFSSION OF FAITH (1.9, 10)

Paragraph 9

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 are not many, but one), it must be searched by other places that speak more clearly.

Paragraph 10

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 Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered, our faith is finally resolved.

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

Scripture is its own best and final interpreter. When we read the Bible and come across an obscure or confusing passage, we have a temptation to run to our favorite Bible teacher or commentator. While they may be helpful in the end, the Confession reminds us that we ought to instinctually run first to other portions of Scripture. The Bible is its own infallible interpreter.

While the Scriptures are clear, they are not equally easy to interpret, and therefore we ought to build our theology first from those passages which are most clear and straight forward. Bad things happen when we begin to build doctrine from obscure passages of Scripture. Instead, we ought to interpret the obscure parts of Scripture in light of the clear.

For instance, there are churches in the Western part of my state who believe it's normal and even commanded for Christians to handle venomous snakes in their worship services. They base this view on a single verse at the end of Mark's gospel. (Mk. 16:20) They have made a minor reference in Mark a feature and hallmark of their entire ministry. This is not wise interpretation of Scripture.

Another example would be preachers who promise health and prosperity to people based off a lop-sided reading of the Bible. Does the Scripture promise health to those who trust in Christ? Of course it does. But it also promises suffering. Our interpretation must take into account all the Bible says on a particular subject. This is why we should be familiar with every part of Scripture, not just a few comforting passages.

Let me give you a short list of practical rules for interpretation:

- 1. Consider Authorial Intent:** What did the Biblical author (both human and divine) intend to communicate.
- 2. Genre Matters:** The Bible is full of different species of literature. There's historical narrative, law, wisdom literature, poetry, prophecy, epistolary, apocalyptic and more. Each of those genres must be interpreted according to its own style and structure. You do not interpret prophecy the way you interpret a narrative.
- 3. Typology Connects the Testaments:** In Luke 24, Jesus Christ says that all the Scripture point to and reveal Him. The Old Testament is full of shadows and prefigurements of Christ.
- 4. Theology Gives Guardrails:** If you've never read a systematic theology, you ought to consider doing so. A systematic theology is a book that summarizes what the entire Bible teaches on a given subject such as God, Jesus Christ, the church, or sin. An easy-to-read intro to theology is Essentials of the Christian Faith by R. C.

Sproul. You could also familiarize yourself with the Second London Confession. A good systematic theology keeps us from veering off the road while interpreting individual passages.

THE FINAL AUTHORITY

The final paragraph of the first chapter of the Confession reminds us that Scripture is the supreme judge. The Bible is the rule of faith. It is the ruling rule. Creeds and Confessions, while helpful, are ruled rules. In other words, they are ruled by the Bible. So, our confessions and creeds are only authoritative to the degree that they agree with the teaching of Holy Scripture.

Our private impressions or thoughts are not authoritative and must be submitted to the Word of God. The teaching we listen to must be compared with Scripture. The Bereans in Acts 17:11 we commended as more noble than the Thessalonians because they listened to Paul's preaching and then examined the Scriptures for themselves to see if he was telling the truth.

CONCLUSION

The Confession sets forth what we might call a high view of the Scriptures. Baptists have always been people "of the Book." We've sought, from the beginning of our denominational roots to order and structure our churches in light of Holy Scripture. That's not to say that other denominations have not. But Baptists especially concern themselves with the reading, teaching, and proclaiming of the Bible.

APPENDIX A

A Simple Inductive Method for Bible Study⁷

Preliminary Step: Pray for Illumination

Before beginning, pray earnestly. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to understand the Scriptures (Psalm 119:18), to reveal Christ in the text, and to convict you toward obedience. Commit to applying what you learn, remembering that the Bible is God's breathed-out Word for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16–17). The method follows three main steps:

Observation What does the text say?

Interpretation What does the text mean?

Application How does the text change me?

This is inductive: We let the text speak first, building from facts to meaning to life change.

1. Observation: What Does the Text Say?

If you are beginning the study of an entire book, you will be well served to read the entire book in one sitting, multiple times if the book is not too long. You want to have a sense of the “whole,” as you study the various “parts.”

Ask these questions and note answers in a notebook:

For the Whole Book (Do this first for context):

- What kind of literature is this (narrative, poetry, prophecy, letter, apocalyptic, law, wisdom)?
- Who is the author?
- Who is the audience?
- Where/when is the author writing from?
- Where/when is the audience?

⁷ A list of recommended Bible study resources is supplied in Appendix B

- Why did the author write (occasion)?
- What is the author's purpose?
- Where are the "seams" (major divisions, transitions, repeated phrases)?

Read the passage slowly (multiple times, preferably in 2–3 translations, e.g., ESV and KJV/NKJV). Mark differences if any. Listen to the tone—is it commanding, comforting, warning, singing?

For the Specific Passage:

- What does the author emphasize (repeated ideas, key words/phrases)?
- What is repeated (words, phrases, ideas)?
- What is related (cause/effect, comparisons, contrasts)?
- Who is talking? Who are they talking to? Key people/relationships?
- Commands to obey? Sins to avoid? Promises to trust?
- Geographical, chronological, historical/cultural details?
- Other observations (themes, questions, thoughts)?

List any cross-references that come to mind.

2. Interpretation: What Does the Text Mean?

Now organize your observations and consider the language, history, and theology of the passage to discern meaning.

Language/Literary:

- How many paragraphs/sections? What are the main thoughts in each?
- What is the general sense/flow of the passage?
- Research key words (original meaning, usage in context).
- Identify figures of speech (metaphor, simile, paradox, euphemism) and literary devices (chiasm, inclusio, type/shadow).

- What is the basic structure/argument?

Historical/Cultural:

- Set the passage in its background (author, audience, occasion, purpose).
- Research historical/cultural terms or customs.

Theological/Redemptive:

- Place in progressive revelation (how does this fit the unfolding story of Scripture?).
- Cross-reference similar themes/passages (prioritize same author or NT fulfillment).
- What does God reveal about Himself (His character, works)?
- About humanity (sin, need)?
- About salvation/the gospel?

Main Idea of the Text (MIT):

Summarize the passage in one clear, declarative sentence (the singular theme/unifying idea).

Seeing Christ in the Text:

The Bible is Christ-centered—all Scripture points to Him (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39). Ask:

- How does this passage show our need for Christ (e.g., sin, failure, shadow of redemption)?
- How is Christ the fulfillment/antitype (e.g., promise, pattern, person, event, institution fulfilled in His life, death, resurrection)?
- How does the New Testament interpret or apply this text to Christ (explicit quotes, allusions)?

3. Application: How Does the Text Change Me?

Bridge from ancient text to today. Application flows from accurate interpretation—never isolated from the gospel.

Moral/Ethical Applications: How should this change my thoughts, desires, and actions?

- What commands/sins/promises apply to me?
- How should my beliefs/behavior change?
- What obstacles might prevent obedience? How to overcome them?

Eschatological: How does this point to ultimate hope in Christ?

- What eternal truths about redemption, the church, or future glory does it teach?
- How does it encourage perseverance toward the final kingdom?

Personal Response:

Write 1–3 specific, measurable steps (e.g., "Pray daily for X," "Confess Y to a brother," "Share this truth with Z"). Pray over them, asking God to work them out in your life, small group, church, and witness to the lost.

APPENDIX B

Recommended Resources for Beginning Bible Study

Bibles

Multiple English Translations – A good Bible student will own or have access to several English translations of the Bible. In my own study, I regularly consult: KJV, NKJV, ESV, NIV, CSB, NLT.

Study Bible – The ESV Study Bible is my personal favorite. Other good study Bibles include the Reformation Study Bible (Crossway) and the Apologetics Study Bible (CSB)

Reference Works

Concordance – A concordance is an alphabetical index of words appearing in the Bible. For each word, the concordance lists the Bible verses where that word occurs. Understanding how the Bible uses its own keywords is critical to accurate study. Strong's Concordance can be purchased or accessed for free online.

Word Study Tools – Word study tools are like a dictionary of Hebrew and Greek words for those who don't have experience with the Biblical languages. Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary and Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary are both good options.

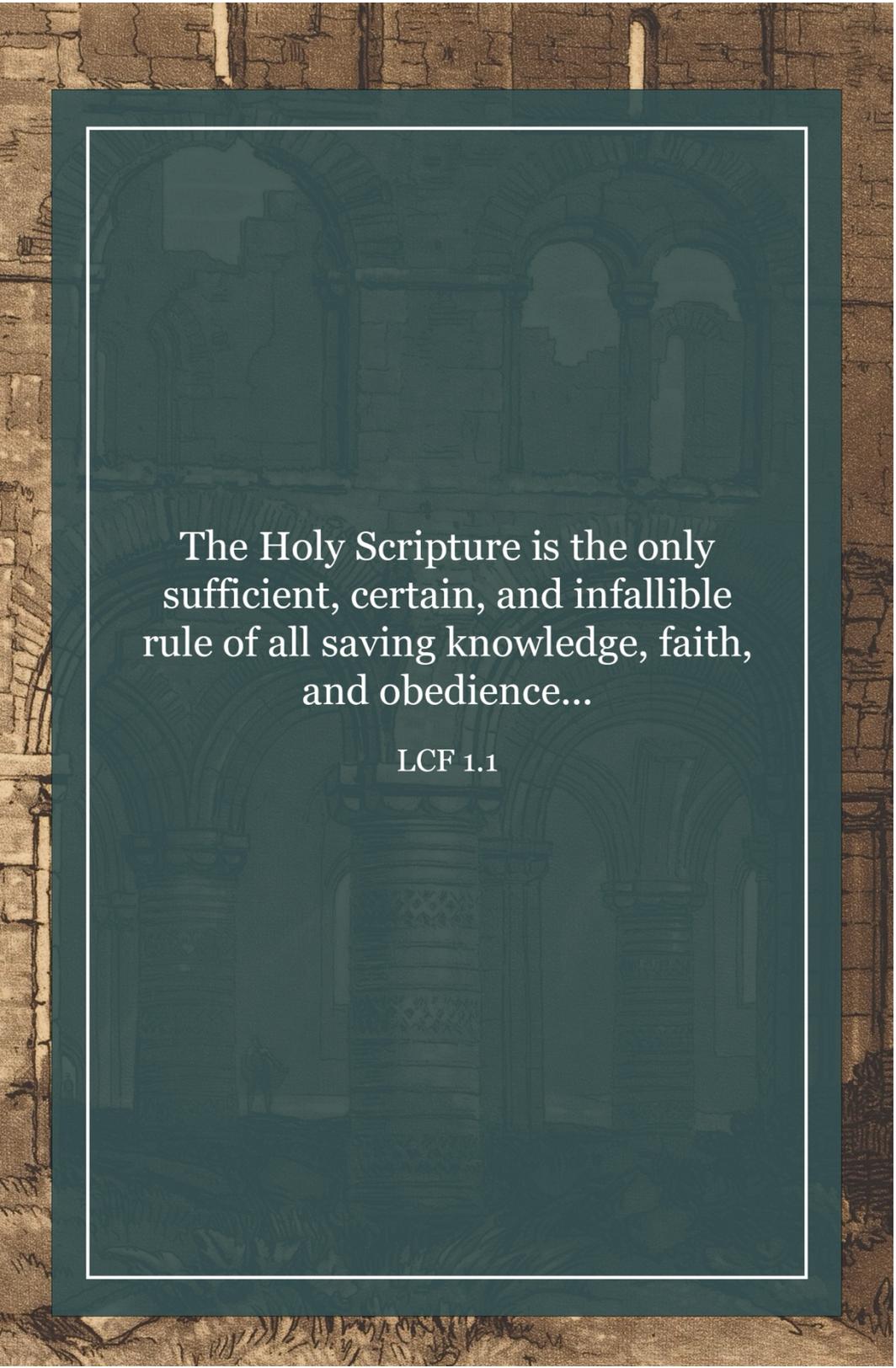
Bible Dictionary – A Bible dictionary helps the student understand the historical, cultural, and geographical details of the Bible. I prefer the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary.

Commentaries

There are hundreds (if not thousands) of commentaries on the Bible.

Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible – This commentary can be purchased or accessed for free online. Matthew Henry was a Puritan Divine who wrote extensively on the Bible and Christian life. I commend all his works to you.

John Calvin's Commentaries – Can be accessed for free online.
Calvin is a wonderful reader of the text, and I use his
commentaries weekly.



The Holy Scripture is the only
sufficient, certain, and infallible
rule of all saving knowledge, faith,
and obedience...

LCF 1.1