

THE DOCTRINE OF IMMEDIATE INSPIRATION IN THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION

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THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH repeatedly declares in its first chapter that the supreme authority of Scripture for Christian faith and life derives from its divine authorship, making it the Word of God. That is, it has “pleased the Lord . . . to commit” his revealed will to the church “wholly unto writing,” namely, “the Holy Scripture” (1.1). The “authority of the Holy Scripture” thus depends “wholly upon God” being “the author thereof” (1.4). That authorship makes Scripture “the Word of God” to be believed and obeyed (1.4). Consequentially, it is “the Holy Spirit” whom we hear “speaking in the Scripture,” making him “the supreme judge” in all religious and ecclesiastical matters (1.10).¹

Furthermore, in its first chapter, the Confession repeatedly attributes the divine authorship of Scripture, and thus its lasting character as “the Word of God written” (1.2), to the divine work of inspiration by which men wrote it. After listing those writings as the books of the Old and New Testament, the Confession states that they are all “given by inspiration of God” to be his authoritative “rule of faith and life” (1.2). Because these books alone are “of divine inspiration,” they alone have “authority in the church of God,” unlike uninspired “human writings” (1.3). More specifically, “the Old Testament in Hebrew” and “the New Testament in Greek” were “immediately inspired by God” and subsequently preserved by him to be the final authority in the church (1.8). Because inspiration was understood to be the work specifically of the Holy Spirit (as indicated by proof texts cited in 1.9 and 1.10), we hear “the Holy Spirit speaking” in Scripture (1.10).

Thus, the inspiration of Scripture is foundational to the Confession’s entire system of biblically based theology. Scripture is authoritative because it is the Word of God,

1. The text and proof texts of the Westminster Confession quoted and referenced in this article have been checked against the critical edition of John R. Bower, *The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), and compared with *The Confession of Faith; the Larger and Shorter Catechisms* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1973), from which the Larger Catechism is quoted. The spelling and capitalization have been modernized. The texts of all other confessional documents are taken from Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed. rev. David S. Schaff, 3 vols. (1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983).

authored by God as the result of the Holy Spirit's work of inspiring its human writers to convey the divine message.²

That being so, one would think that the Westminster Divines had a definite concept of inspiration in view as they wrote and approved chapter 1 of their Confession, and one would expect their understanding of inspiration to be evident in that document. Nonetheless, it has been repeatedly asserted that the Confession sets forth merely the fact of inspiration, not a particular understanding of it.³ Now, it is true that not so much as a sentence in the Confession is devoted to explaining the nature of inspiration or describing how it took place (often called its "mode"). But when we look closely at what the Confession says about the origin and nature of Scripture, we will discover that much more is there than may appear on the surface. Furthermore, we can gain deeper insight into the confessional understanding of inspiration and the meaning of its seventeenth-century terminology when we examine what was written about inspiration by the authors of the Confession, those who influenced them, and their closest contemporaries. Against this background, a clear picture of inspiration will emerge from the text of the Confession.⁴

1. The Chief Authors of, and Influences on, the Confession

The deliberations of the Assembly of Divines began at Westminster Abbey in 1643 and effectively drew to a close in 1649. The theologians and ministers chosen for the Assembly, originally 121 in number, were drawn from all over England (and Wales) and were joined by four nonvoting ministerial commissioners sent by the Church of Scotland. Work on the text of the Confession of Faith, after some preparatory work,

2. Richard A. Muller, in *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2 of 4, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 89, hereinafter cited as *PRRD*, states that "the authority of Scripture is not grounded by Westminster on the concept of inspiration but rather on its nature as Word." Yes, the Confession does base the authority of Scripture on its divine authorship as the Word of God, but it also bases its divine authorship, and thus its authority, on its divine inspiration. Without inspiration, there is no Word and no authority. Muller bases his assertion on a quotation from WCF 1.5, which states, not what the authority of Scripture is based upon, but rather where "our full persuasion and assurance" of that authority comes from.

3. See, e.g., Alex. F. Mitchell, "Introduction," in Alex. F. Mitchell and John Struthers, eds., *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874), xlix–xli; Edward D. Morris, *Theology of the Westminster Symbols* (Columbus, OH: Champlin, 1900), 78; C. G. McCrie, *The Confessions of the Church of Scotland: Their Evolution in History* (Edinburgh: MacNiven & Wallace, 1907), 169; George S. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1960), 29; Jack Bartlett Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1966), 301; John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1973), 75–76, followed by Muller, *PRRD*, 2:90, 94; J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 75; Jeffrey A. Stivason, "Is Warfield's Claim True That Calvin Is Better Than Westminster on Inspiration?" *WTJ* 81 (2019): 286 n. 35.

4. Cf. Wayne R. Spear, "Word and Spirit in the Westminster Confession," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan III (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2003), 1:44–45.

was done by a committee for the Confession in 1644 and 1645,⁵ began in earnest in May 1645, and was completed by December 1646. At the insistence of the English Parliament, to which the Assembly reported, proof texts (which had been considered all along, with the intent to be completely biblical⁶) were added in 1647.

The chief authors of the Confession were the seven members of the drafting committee constituted on May 12, 1645: Thomas Temple, Joshua Hoyle, Thomas Gataker, Robert Harris, Anthony Burgess, Edward Reynolds, and Charles Herle, assisted by the Scottish commissioners.⁷ This committee's first report, presenting a draft of what would become chapter 1 of the Confession, "Of the Holy Scripture," was submitted to the Assembly for debate on July 7. It received attention (as did other matters) on July 7, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18, but nothing pertaining specifically to inspiration is mentioned in the Minutes of the Assembly as a matter of debate or revision.⁸ The draft would appear to have been revised only slightly.

On July 11, 1645, the Assembly assigned each of its three standing committees, into which the Assembly had divided itself in 1643 for more efficient operation, the task of considering an allotment of the remaining topics of the Confession and delivering drafts on them to the whole Assembly for debate. John R. Bower infers that the drafting committee was disbanded and that the standing committees assumed the responsibility of preparing the drafts of the remaining chapters, but Alexander F. Mitchell, Benjamin B. Warfield, and Jack B. Rogers argue more convincingly that the drafting committee continued to produce drafts, and thereafter delivered them to the assigned standing committees, which reviewed them and then reported to the whole Assembly.⁹ So we would agree with Rogers that the members of the drafting committee were "the primary authors of the Confession of Faith,"¹⁰ but even if Bower

5. See Bower, *Confession of Faith*, 32–34. The committee for the Confession may have had a larger role in formulating the Confession than has been recognized, but the members of the drafting committee were drawn from it, and those not on the drafting committee, including John Arrowsmith and Henry Palmer (who was initially named to it), held the same view of Scripture. See H. D. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation: An Historical Study A.D. 1700 to A.D. 1860* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 205 (mentioning William Bridge by mistake for Palmer), 202.

6. See Chad Van Dixhoorn, ed., *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1:201.

7. See Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1897), 367–68; Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, vol. 6 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 87–96, 156–58; Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 160–62, 440 (mistaking Dr. Cornelius Burges for Mr. Anthony Burgess on the committee; their surname was variously spelled Burges, Burgess, and Burgesse); Bower, *Confession of Faith*, 33–34. Bower calls the drafting committee the confession committee, in continuity with the larger previous committee(s) from which all but one of its members came.

8. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 3:628–36. See Bower, *Confession of Faith*, 52–57; Muller, *PRRD*, 2:87.

9. See Mitchell, *Westminster Assembly*, 368–69; Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 89–96; Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 163–65, 176; Bower, *Confession of Faith*, 35.

10. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 440.

is correct, the members of the drafting committee would still have been the primary authors of chapter 1 on Scripture. It is also likely that the members of the drafting committee participated in the final review of the Confession in December 1646.¹¹

The Scottish commissioners—Robert Baillie, George Gillespie, Alexander Henderson, and Samuel Rutherford (or Rutherford)—exercised a constant influence on the text of the Confession (although Henderson returned home on August 7, 1645, because of illness and died soon thereafter¹²). They participated in the deliberations of the drafting committee, entered into the Assembly debates, and were regularly consulted when the wording of the Confession was reviewed.¹³ Some have even discerned evidence of Gillespie’s hand in the formulation of chapter 1.¹⁴

On July 8, 1645, the Assembly appointed a wording committee to perfect the language of the Confession, both by incorporating changes approved by the Assembly and by proposing additional changes.¹⁵ These wordsmiths were Edward Reynolds and Charles Herle (who were both already on the drafting committee) and Matthew Newcomen, who were joined by others as the Assembly worked on later chapters of the Confession.¹⁶ The presence of Cornelius Burges should also be noted, for, as Chad Van Dixhoorn comments, he “ran the Westminster assembly and was arguably its most important member,” was “involved in virtually every assembly debate,” and “frequently wrote the final draft of the assembly’s documents,” even though he was “the frequent opponent of the majority.”¹⁷ He did some final editorial work and transcribed the copies of the Confession that were presented to Parliament.¹⁸ The perfecting work of the wording committee and Burges enhanced the verbal quality and consistency of the Confession in general, but there is no evidence that it affected the statements in chapter 1 pertaining to inspiration.

When we look beyond the Westminster Assembly itself and consider who influenced the Divines who formulated it, we should begin by recognizing that the Confession is an expression of English (and Scottish) Reformed theology as it had developed since the Reformation, particularly in its Puritan expression. The two most influential theologians in that development were probably William Whitaker (1547–1595) and William Perkins (1558–1602).¹⁹ Their writings will prove helpful in elucidating what those who learned from them say about inspiration in the Confession.

11. So Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 101–2; Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 172.

12. Bower, *Confession of Faith*, 34 n. 37.

13. Mitchell, *Westminster Assembly*, 368; Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 163, 440. See Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 3:629.

14. Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 175–76 (citing Candlish and Mitchell).

15. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 3:629.

16. On the meticulous work of the wording committee, see Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 96–99, 158; Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 162–63, 165–70; Bower, *Confession of Faith*, 36–37.

17. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1:16–18.

18. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 4:356. Regarding the wording committee and Cornelius Burges, see Bower, *Confession of Faith*, 37–38.

19. On the importance of Whitaker as a source for the Confession’s doctrine of Scripture, see Spear, “Word and Spirit in the Westminster Confession,” 40–41 (summary).

More broadly, the theology of the Divines was rooted in Reformed theology as it developed on the Continent, from John Calvin (1509–1564) and the other Reformers onward. With regard to the doctrine of Scripture, there was what Richard A. Muller describes as “a fairly direct line of doctrinal development . . . from the earliest Reformed confessional statements . . . through the more expanded discussions of Scripture . . . to the doctrinal *loci* on Scripture found in the early orthodox systems.”²⁰ As a result of this process, as Muller states, following Philip Schaff and Benjamin B. Warfield, “there is little difference in doctrine and perspective between the divines of the Westminster Assembly and their continental Reformed orthodox counterparts.”²¹ But during the sixteenth century, little consideration was given to the subject of inspiration because there was almost no disagreement between Catholics and Protestants, or among Protestants, about Scripture being the divinely inspired and infallible Word of God. The Reformed (and Lutheran) confessions simply assumed or briefly stated that Scripture was the inspired and authoritative Word of God.²² But when a broader set of issues about Scripture was developing in the early seventeenth century, first the Irish Articles of Religion (1615), and then more fully the Westminster Confession (1647), treated the doctrine of Scripture at some length. Thus, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England (Latin, 1562; English, 1571), which had some influence on the Assembly as the confession that it was initially tasked with revising, had very little to offer regarding the doctrine of Scripture.²³ But half a century later, the Irish Articles devoted its first six articles to the doctrine of Scripture and, in so doing, was followed by the Westminster Confession²⁴—though not uncritically.²⁵

One of the most important men who influenced the Assembly was James Ussher (or Usher), who is believed to be the principal author of the Irish Articles, written while he was professor of divinity at Trinity College, Dublin.²⁶ He was the archbishop of Armagh from 1625 onward, but he was forced out of Ireland by the Irish Rebellion of 1641 and spent his remaining years in England. He was twice invited to the Westminster Assembly, but he declined to come because of his loyalty to King Charles

20. Muller, *PRRD*, 2:80.

21. Muller, *PRRD*, 2:92.

22. See Muller, *PRRD*, 2:231–33.

23. See Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 65–67, 69–81; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:761. The Thirty-nine Articles do not address the inspiration of Scripture, although among the homilies recommended in art. 35 is Homily 10, “Of the Reverent Estimation of God’s Word,” which at one point briefly summarizes the teaching of 2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Pet. 1:21.

24. See Mitchell, *Westminster Assembly*, 382–95; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:761–65; Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 59, 169–75; Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 260; Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 63–69; Bower, *Confession of Faith*, 45–48.

25. The Irish Articles allowed that “the Church doth read” the Apocrypha for edification (art. 3), and declared that three ancient creeds “ought firmly to be received and believed” as being fully in accord with Scripture (art. 7), which the Divines refrained from doing (WCF 1.3, 10).

26. Regarding Ussher’s influence on the Assembly, see Mitchell, “Introduction,” in Mitchell and Struthers, *Minutes of the Sessions*, xlvi; Mitchell, *Westminster Assembly*, 389; Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1979), 201; Muller, *PRRD*, 2:91.

I, who opposed Parliament's establishment of the Assembly. Nonetheless, making an impact on the Assembly was his book *A Body of Divinitie*, which was published in London during the Assembly.²⁷ As Rogers notes, "Its much fuller treatment of many of the themes of the Confession helps us to understand the background of the more terse confessional formulae."²⁸

The most significant influence on the Assembly's formulation of chapter 1 on Scripture arguably came from the Puritan minister John Ball.²⁹ He was an immensely popular writer who might well have been invited to the Assembly had he not died in 1640. His catechism in particular had a formative influence on Puritanism, going through endless printings during the seventeenth century. It was "in everybody's hand," relates Warfield,³⁰ and its statements on Scripture parallel those in chapter 1 of the Confession, sometimes even in phraseology.³¹

While there is good reason to look particularly to the British theological background for understanding the Confession,³² we must remember that English Reformed theologians were also aware of developments among their Continental brethren.³³ Indeed, the Westminster Divines devoted their first and most substantial chapter to setting forth a full doctrine of Scripture, following the trajectory started by the Irish Articles, partly because that subject was becoming a matter of increasing attention in wider Reformed and other circles.³⁴ There was still widespread agreement in the Reformed world on the nature of inspiration, but consideration of the role of human writers in the composition of Scripture, which we will address in section 5 below, was already starting to affect discussions of inspiration by the time when the Confession was being written—although historical-critical study of the Bible and philosophical rationalism were still in their infancy and did not seriously challenge the traditional understanding of Scripture until later in the seventeenth century.³⁵

27. See Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 261–62. Apparently because Ussher had written this book as a young man in reliance on the writings of others, he did not want it to be published as if it were his original work. And as one in the royalist camp, he may not have wanted his name to be associated with the anti-royalist Assembly. Nonetheless, it was published as his by John Downname, who worked with the Assembly, in 1645. See Harrison Perkins, "Manuscript and Material Evidence for James Ussher's Authorship of *A Body of Divinitie* (1645)," *EQ* 89 (2018): 133–61, demonstrating Ussher's authorship and his approval of the work by 1647.

28. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 261.

29. Emphasizing the influence of John Ball, along with that of James Ussher, are Mitchell, *Westminster Assembly*, 387–89; Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 176–77.

30. Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 176.

31. This is set out in detail by Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 176–90.

32. See Mitchell, *Westminster Assembly*, 380–82; cf. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 438.

33. See Richard A. Muller, "'Inspired by God—Pure in All Ages': The Doctrine of Scripture in the Westminster Confession," in *Scripture and Worship*, by Richard A. Muller and Rowland S. Ward (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 41. Cf. Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 161–69.

34. See Muller, *PRRD*, 2:87, 230–32, 248.

35. These post-Assembly developments are well summarized by Muller, *PRRD*, 2:130–48.

Thus, in support of a close analysis of the wording of the Confession pertaining to the doctrine of inspiration and helping to elucidate its terminology at times, we will consult the relevant writings of the participants in the Assembly, especially the members of the drafting committee and the Scottish commissioners. We will also look to those who influenced the Divines, notably Whitaker, Perkins, Ussher, and Ball, and for greater context, we will give some attention to others who either preceded or followed the Assembly.³⁶

2. Authorship and Inspiration

There was no dispute among the Divines, or among Reformed theologians more generally, that God was the author of Scripture, making it the Word of God, of divine origin and authority. On that basis, Scripture was considered the foundation of, the logical priority for, theology and all other religious knowledge.³⁷ It was further agreed that God was the author of Scripture because words of divine origination came to be written by the writers of Scripture as the Holy Spirit inspired them so to write.³⁸ Let us see how this understanding comes to expression in the Westminster Confession.

“God,” the Confession states, is “the author” of Scripture (1.4). The word *author* designates the originator, creator, or composer of something. Since the author of an ancient book, letter, or other writing wrote out the initial copy of his work by hand (or employed an amanuensis to do so), he could also be called its *writer*. We still use the words *author* and *writer* interchangeably, although technology has changed. But the Divines (and other theologians in their day), when speaking of Scripture, typically reserved the word *author* for God. The inspired writers of Scripture were usually called *writers*, but since that word could be ambiguous with regard to authorship, they were often more specifically called the *penmen* of Scripture. Accordingly, the Confession makes God “the” author of Scripture. The inspired writers are not recognized in the Confession as authors of Scripture because the Divines did not view them as having a hand in its origination or composition.

“Scripture,” explains William Whitaker, “hath for its author God himself; from whom it first proceeded and came forth.” The expression “God himself” excludes all others. And because inspiration is the particular work of the Holy Spirit, it may be said that “he is the author of the scriptures.” Hence, Scripture is the verbal expression of “the mind, intention, and dictate of the Holy Spirit.” When considering what the correct interpretation of Scripture is, Whitaker says, we must seek out “the sense of the Holy Spirit,” that is “his mind and intention” as expressed in the text.³⁹ William

36. The spelling and capitalization in the writings of these men, but not in the titles of their writings, will be modernized for the sake of clarity, unless already done so by the editor of the printed text quoted.

37. On Scripture as the Word of God and *principium cognoscendi theologiae*, see Muller, *PRRD*, 2:151–55.

38. On the common Reformed understanding of inspiration, see Muller, *PRRD*, 2:242–45.

39. William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*, trans. William Fitzgerald (1588; Cambridge: University Press, 1849), 289, 410; see also 451.

Gouge, who was a member of the original committee for the Confession,⁴⁰ succinctly states in his catechism that “the author” of the Scriptures is simply “the Holy Spirit of God,” in that he “inspired holy men to write them.”⁴¹

John Ball, in his catechism, clearly distinguishes between “God the author” of Scripture and “the holy penmen” who wrote it.⁴² He explains that “it is one thing to believe that God is the author of this or that book” in the Bible, but “another to believe that it was written by this or that scribe, or amanuensis.” Ball adds that the prophets and apostles “wrote not as men in the church, but”—because of their inspiration—“above the church.”⁴³

The distinction between the divine author and the human writers (or penmen) is carefully set out and vigorously defended by William Perkins, who declares about God: “He alone is the true and undoubted author thereof, and none but he.”⁴⁴ He distinguishes between “the author” of the Scriptures, namely God, and “the writers and penmen” of Scripture, who were “guided by the Holy Ghost,” not by their own “natural reason.”⁴⁵ James Ussher likewise explains that because Scripture “proceeds not from the wit or mind of men” but was written by God’s chosen men as they were “moved by the Holy Ghost,” it follows that “God alone is to be accounted the author” of Scripture, for he “inspired the hearts of those holy men” to write.⁴⁶

While the Divines maintain the conceptual distinction between divine author and human writers, and the terminological distinction is also characteristically maintained,⁴⁷ they occasionally speak of the “author” of an individual book in the sense of its human writer. This, however, is not meant to deny that God alone is the author in the sense of the originator and composer of the text. For example, John Lightfoot, a learned biblical scholar at the Assembly, comments on Acts 4:25: “The second Psalm, which owns not its author in the title, the Holy Ghost ascribeth here to David: and seemeth, by this very passage, to give us close intimation, that every Psalm, that telleth not, in its title, who was the author and penman of it, is to be ascribed to David, as the penman.”⁴⁸ Here Lightfoot speaks of the “author” of Psalm 2 in the sense of its “penman,” but the information imparted in the book of Acts he ascribes to the Holy Spirit—because Luke (no different from David) wrote only what the Spirit gave him to write. “The inspired penmen,” Lightfoot writes in another place, wrote what “the Holy Ghost directed them to write.”⁴⁹ In the same sense that Lightfoot speaks of

40. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 3:329.

41. William Gouge, *A Short Catechisme* (London, 1616), Q/A 3.

42. John Ball, *A Short Treatise Containing All the Principal Grounds of Christian Religion* (14th impression; London, 1654), 6. “A Short Catechism, with an Exposition upon the Same,” forms the bulk of this work.

43. Ball, *Short Treatise*, 14, 15–16.

44. W. Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* (Cambridge, 1606), 223.

45. Perkins, *Cases of Conscience*, 223–24.

46. James Usher, *A Body of Divinitie* (London: Tho. Downes and Geo. Badger, 1645), 7–85.

47. As acknowledged by Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 300.

48. John Lightfoot, *A Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles* [1645], in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, ed. John Rogers Pitman (London, 1822–1825), 8:74.

49. John Lightfoot, *The Harmony, Chronicle, and Order, of the New Testament* [1654], in *Works*, ed. Pitman, 3:369. Surprisingly, Lightfoot occasionally refers to the Holy Spirit as “the

David as the author of Psalm 2, Edward Reynolds says that Solomon was the “author” of Ecclesiastes.⁵⁰ Yet we shall see that his view of authorship and inspiration did not differ from that of Lightfoot or the Confession.

Since God is the author of Scripture, and indeed the sole author of it, in the sense of its originator and composer, the Confession calls it “the Word of God written” (1.2), “the Word of God” (1.4, 5, 8), or simply “the Word” (1.5, 6 *bis*).⁵¹ Such expressions were understood in a simple, straightforward sense, as Whitaker explains: “God himself speaks in the scripture, and scripture is on that account styled the word of God,” making it “as it were a letter sent to us from God.”⁵² Because God is “the author” of Scripture, Perkins calls it “the Book of God” and “the Word of God.”⁵³ The Westminster Larger Catechism underlines the divine origin of the Scriptures, calling them not just “the Word of God” (Q. 4) but emphatically “the very Word of God” (A. 4). These terms for Scripture express divine authorship, and, when understood as the Divines understood them, they are incompatible with limited or shared human authorship.⁵⁴ The Confession implies as much when it states that “the heavenliness of the matter” of Scripture, its many “incomparable excellencies,” and “the entire perfection thereof” provide abundant evidence that it is “the Word of God” (1.5)—and not of anyone else.⁵⁵

The Confession’s description of Scripture as “the Word of God written” (1.2) implies that there was also an unwritten Word of God. That would refer to the spoken words of the prophets through which God would “reveal himself” and “declare that his will unto his church” (citing Heb. 1:1), which afterward he would “commit . . . unto writing,” namely “the Holy Scripture,” which revelation alone remains in the church (1.1). So there is a wider sense in which the Word of God includes any communication of God, but also a narrower sense, more relevant today, in which the Scriptures constitute the Word of God.

Sometimes, it is said (as in the Irish Articles, art. 1) that Scripture “contains” the Word of God, not that Scripture “is” the Word of God. Some would argue that the former expression distinguishes between the Word of God and Scripture,⁵⁶ but all it means in this context is that the content of Scripture consists of the Word of God, namely God’s message to his people. Since God is the author of the book that we call Scripture, it follows that all the words in that book are God’s words. Hence, Scripture,

penner of Scripture,” the one who “wrote” or “penned” the Scriptures (as quoted by Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 296, 297). This choice of words may be confusing, but Lightfoot means only that the Spirit controlled what was penned by the human writers, just as a person controls a pen that puts out the ink. See more on Lightfoot in section 5.

50. Edward Reynolds, “Annotations on the Book of Ecclesiastes” [1645], in *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Edward Reynolds, D.D.*, ed. John Rogers Pitman (London: B. Holdsworth, 1826), 4:36, 37.

51. The Thirty-nine Articles similarly speak of “God’s Word written” (art. 20) and mention “the Word of God” and “God’s Word” several times.

52. Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 445.

53. Perkins, *Cases of Conscience*, 223–24.

54. So Perkins, *Cases of Conscience*, 223–25.

55. This is developed at greater length in Usher, *Body of Divinitie*, 8–11.

56. See Muller, *PRRD*, 2:85–86.

specifically referring to its contents, words, and message, is commonly called the Word of God. The equivalence of the two expressions is shown by two statements made by Ussher in *The Body of Divinitie*. He asks, “What is Scripture then?” and answers, “The Word of God written by men inspired by the Holy Ghost.” On the same page, he asks, “Where then is the Word of God now certainly to be learned?” and answers, “Only out of the Book of God contained in the Holy Scriptures, which are the only certain testimonies unto the Church of the Word of God.”⁵⁷

Modern writers often try to capture the Confession’s distinction between the divine author and the human writers of Scripture by referring to God as the “primary” or “ultimate” author of Scripture and to the human writers as its “secondary” authors. This is usually understood to attribute to the writers an active part, not just in the physical writing and subsequent issuance of Scripture, but in its composition, a role that the Divines rejected as inconsistent with its being the very Word of God. In Ussher’s words, the Scriptures were “indited [*i.e.*, composed, dictated] by God himself.”⁵⁸ Consistent with the Confession, one may speak of “dual authorship” only equivocally, with God being the author in the sense of the originator and composer of the text and the human writers being authors in the sense of those who wrote words as expressions of their thoughts, with the understanding that those thoughts and words came from God without human creative work being involved in their formulation. Thus, Matthew Poole (1624–1679) could speak of God being “the chief author” of 1–2 Samuel and the “penman” of the book being unknown, but not a matter of “any great importance.” By this, he meant that the identity of the writers of Scripture (even if considered subordinate authors in that sense) was of little consequence since they simply wrote what God put in their heads to write—just as it didn’t matter “who was the clerk or which was the pen that wrote” an “act of parliament.”⁵⁹

At the beginning of chapter 1, the Confession develops an argument that leads to the conclusion that God alone is the author of Scripture. At first, “it pleased the Lord,” we are told, “to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church” in various ways. “Afterwards,” it pleased him “to commit the same [*i.e.*, his revelation of himself and his will] wholly unto writing,” to be preserved for posterity. Since those former ways have “now ceased,” Scripture is the remaining way of “God’s revealing his will unto his people” (1.1).⁶⁰ In other words, God has revealed his will by communicating it to his people in the writing and subsequent use of the Scriptures.⁶¹ This means that

57. Usher, *Body of Divinitie*, 7.

58. Archbishop Ussher, *The Principles of Christian Religion with a Brief Method of the Doctrine Thereof* (1654; Dublin: William Curry, 1843), 5.

59. Matthew Pool [sic], *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, 2 vols. (London, 1683–1685), the argument to 1–2 Samuel (1:513 in later, paginated, three-volume editions).

60. This summary of the means of revelation should not be understood as stating that the nonliterary ways (e.g., oral prophecy) ceased before the literary ways (*i.e.*, the Scriptures) began. In fact, the nonliterary ways did not cease until the writing of Scripture ended.

61. Muller does not quite capture the Confession’s distinction between nonliterary and literary revelation when he describes the former as “the direct revelation of God” and the latter “the inscription of that revelation” (*PRRD*, 2:88). As we are seeing, the Confession considers Scripture to be just as directly revelational of the will of God as nonliterary forms of revelation.

God is the author, the originator and composer, of the words of Scripture, so that even now divine truths “are revealed in the Word” (1.6). Thus, the entire text of Scripture expresses God’s will as revealed to his people. Christians accept as true “whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein” (14.2), and that can only refer to the entire content of Scripture. Scripture is divine revelation, not merely to the extent that it conveys newly revealed truth, but fundamentally because it expresses a message from the mind of God.

The “writing” to which God committed his message, we know, was penned by human beings. This is simply taken for granted in chapter 1, which mentions the human writers of Scripture only incidentally, by including in the list of the books of Scripture, for example, the book of “Isaiah” and the gospel of “Matthew” (1.2). Other than that, the inspired writers are not mentioned and are certainly not described as even “secondary” authors of Scripture.

WCF 1.3 distinguishes two categories of writings: those “of divine inspiration” (constituting “the canon of the Scripture”) and “human writings,” including “the books commonly called Apocrypha.” Since human beings wrote the Scriptures, the phrase “human writings” here must refer to writings attributable to human authorship, not to all writings that human beings have ever penned. The Apocrypha and all “other human writings” are the product of human authorial activity, whereas Scripture is the product exclusively of “divine inspiration.”⁶²

The words of Scripture, accordingly, must have originated in the mind of God, their author, and been put into the minds of chosen penmen and onto the written page by divine inspiration. Inspiration, then, is a divine operation in the minds of human writers, conveying words of divine origination and composition to them, putting those words into their minds to write, impelling them to write, and guiding them to write those words. All of that must be in view if the Scriptures are the divinely inspired Word of God and not, like the Apocrypha, writings of human origin. According to the Confession, God’s words were written exactly as he formulated them, without any possibility of human addition or omission, producing writings that are truly and entirely the very Word of God.

3. The Giving of Scripture

The same understanding of inspiration is subtly indicated in section 2 of chapter 1, where inspiration is first mentioned. Following the language of 2 Timothy 3:16 (in the Authorized Version and the Geneva Bible, going back to the Tyndale Bible), the Confession states that all the books of Scripture are “given by inspiration of God.”⁶³ It is not unintentional that this paraphrastic expression (representing the single Greek word *θεόπνευστος*) is used, rather than simply “inspired of God” (Wycliffe Bible, Bishops’ Bible), “divinely inspired” (cf. WCF 1.3), or “breathed by God.” The idea

62. The Irish Articles likewise distinguish Scripture from the Apocrypha by denying “such inspiration” to the latter (art. 3), namely “the inspiration of God” (art. 2).

63. Here the Confession follows the Irish Articles, which also, after listing the canonical books, comment: “All which we acknowledge to be given by the inspiration of God” (art. 2).

that God “gives” the words of Scripture by the divine act of inspiration reflects such passages as Acts 2:4 and Mark 13:11. In Acts 2:4, the Christians on the day of Pentecost are said to have spoken in tongues (a form of inspiration) “as the Spirit *gave* (ἔδιδου) them utterance (ἀποφθέγγεσθαι).”⁶⁴ The verb ἀποφθέγγομαι in wider Greek usage refers in various senses to speaking out boldly, but in the New Testament it refers exclusively (three times) to inspired utterance, as it does typically elsewhere. It describes the apostle Peter’s address on Pentecost (Acts 2:14). It also describes the speech of the imprisoned apostle Paul when he was brought before the Roman procurator Festus and King Agrippa to give an account of his Christian faith (Acts 26:25).

The latter occasion was one that Jesus anticipated when he told his disciples not to be anxious about what to say when they were delivered over to the authorities, but rather to “say whatever is *given* (δοθῆ) you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13:11; cf. Matt. 10:19–20; Luke 21:15; 1 Cor. 2:12; 12:8–10). As we see in the book of Acts, they would speak words that were in their own minds, defending themselves, their actions, and their teachings in answer to questions and accusations, but their words, says Jesus, were nonetheless “given” to them—put into their minds—by the Holy Spirit when they were needed. With respect to authorship, “it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.” Heinrich Bullinger, in the first chapter of his Second Helvetic Confession (1566), quotes Matthew 10:20 as providing support from “the Lord himself” that “the Canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles” are “the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men,” for “God speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.”⁶⁵ Ball similarly cites Matthew 10:20 in support of the distinction between God as the author of Scripture and men as its writers (instruments).⁶⁶

Accordingly, we should understand the Confession to be stating that men wrote the words of Scripture, but only words “given” to them by the Holy Spirit in his work of inspiration. Along these lines, we are told that Paul, in his epistles, wrote what was “*given* him” (2 Pet. 3:15; cf. 1:21). All these passages form the linguistic and conceptual background to the paraphrastic translation of 2 Timothy 3:16 in the English Bibles used by the Divines. When they adopted that language in their first reference to inspiration, they indicated that the words of Scripture originated in the mind of God, their author, and were transmitted (given) to the human writers, who received them into their minds and wrote them down.

The “giving” of Scripture should be understood further as the giving of God’s message to the people of God in general, the intended audience of his revealed will (1.1, 6), not just to those who would write it down. Accordingly, the Divines understand the scope of inspiration as extending from the beginning to the end of the Spirit’s work in the minds of the writers. This would have involved putting the words expressing God’s revealed will into their minds, impelling them to write, and guiding

64. All English Bible quotations in this article are taken from the ESV. Italics are added to indicate emphasis.

65. An English version of the Second Helvetic Confession is quoted here from Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:831–32.

66. Ball, *Short Treatise*, 14.

their thoughts and expressions as they wrote to reveal God's will to his people. It was not enough that God gave inspired men his Word, writes Anthony Burgess of the drafting committee; he also "made them" publish it.⁶⁷ Thus, the Confession sees revelation and inspiration as two facets of the work of the Spirit, preserving the divine authorship of the Word of God written. Accordingly, William Gouge comments that in Hebrews 12:25, Moses is said "to *speak by divine inspiration*, or to declare what is revealed by God."⁶⁸ By the process of inspiration, the Holy Spirit communicates, or reveals, God's very words, bringing them to his chosen writers and through their writings to his people, regardless of whether any of their contents are already known to the inspired writers or anyone else.

It should not be overlooked that the Confession says that all the books of Scripture, long since written, "are" given by inspiration (1.2). This indicates that Scripture continues to have the quality of being inspired; that is, it continues to be the message that God is communicating to his people. At the same time, this present givenness is the result of Scripture having been given by God long ago by inspiration.⁶⁹ Reflecting on this perfective combination of past and present, Gouge writes that Scripture both "was given by inspiration of God" and "is given by inspiration of God."⁷⁰

Since the transmission of the words of divine authorship to the minds of the biblical writers was the work of the Holy Spirit, chapter 1 of the Confession concludes by declaring that "in the Scripture" we find not the "opinions of ancient writers" or the "doctrines of men" (including even the opinions and doctrines of prophets and apostles, apart from inspiration), but rather "the Holy Spirit speaking" (1.10). This is the language of either-or, not both-and. Again, "in the Word," we find "God himself speaking" (14.2). That is, the Holy Spirit is the speaker of Scripture in terms of the formulation of its message in the mind of the writer and the impetus for it to be communicated—even when, as in Mark 13:11, Acts 26:25, and 2 Peter 3:15, the God-given words refer to the writer in the first person and express his personal thoughts. Inspiration does not deny that inspired writers are intentional speakers as they write; it simply tells us how their words and thoughts originated and came to be written.

Inspiration, then, according to the Westminster Confession, is the divine action, specifically the work of the Holy Spirit, whereby God gives the Scriptures to his people, revealing his will to them. He does this by putting words of which he is the author into the minds of chosen men to write down, impels them to write, and governs

67. Anthony Burgess, *CXLV Expository Sermons upon the Whole 17th Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John* (London, 1656), 473.

68. William Gouge, *A Commentary on the Whole Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3 vols. (1655; repr., Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1866–1867), 3:250.

69. Similarly, 2 Tim. 3:16 says that Scripture "is" inspired, meaning that it retains the quality of being inspired (i.e., the quality of being God-breathed) that it received when it was originally given. And while inspiration is in this text predicated of Scripture, that does not mean that it is improper to speak of the writers of Scripture as being inspired or to speak of the Spirit's work of inspiration. Words are commonly used in various senses, usually related (as here).

70. Gouge, *Hebrews*, 1:4 ("was given"), 315 ("is given").

their thinking and expression as they write, as the result of which their writings are the very Word of God, unlike all writings of human authorship.

4. Immediate Inspiration, without Means

There remains one word to be considered in chapter 1, tucked away in section 8—the importance of which is indicated by its presence in the title of this article. In that section, the authentic Scriptures, of final authority in the church, are declared to be the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek because these texts were “immediately inspired by God” and have been “kept pure in all ages.” Translations in the languages of the people are nonetheless desirable so that “the Word of God,” namely “the Scriptures,” may dwell “plentifully in all.”

The Confession here recognizes that translations contain “the Word of God” and are “Scripture,” and thus are inspired. But since no translation is perfect, their inspiration extends only so far as they agree with the Hebrew and Greek texts. The Confession does not say that explicitly, but it implies as much when it states that only the Hebrew and Greek texts are “authentic” and of final authority. In implicit response to the Roman Catholic claim that the Latin Vulgate preserves the authentic text better than the Hebrew and Greek texts championed by Protestants, the Confession asserts that the church’s Hebrew and Greek texts accurately preserve the original writings, which, unlike the Vulgate and all other translations, were “immediately inspired by God.”

The word “immediately” is crucial here, though it is passed over with little or no comment by most writers dealing with the first chapter of the Confession.⁷¹ Muller at least notes that, according to Dutch theologian Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641), inspiration “consists both in ‘immediate revelation’ and in the ‘direction’ of the biblical authors by the Spirit,” linking immediacy to the words “as they were” in 2 Peter 1:21: “men spoke from God *as they were* carried along by the Holy Spirit.”⁷² Whitaker explains that “authentic scripture must proceed immediately from the Holy Ghost himself,” unlike Jerome’s Latin translation.⁷³ The Hebrew and Greek texts of Scripture are “immediately inspired,” whereas translations of those texts (by implication) are only mediately inspired. The word *immediate* itself expresses the absence of any mediation, any means, or any intermediate agency in bringing about an effect.

If anyone can clearly and concisely explain what the Confession means by immediate inspiration, it would be John Ball writing in his catechism. Not only was his catechism well known to everyone at the Assembly, but also, as Warfield shows, it verbally parallels the Confession at this point.⁷⁴ After stating that Scripture is called the Word of God because it is “immediately inspired,” Ball explains: “To be

71. One exception is Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 129, 144–45, discussed below.

72. Muller, *PRRD*, 2:43, quoting Franciscus Gomarus, *Disputationes theologicæ*, 1.1, in Gomarus, *Opera theologica omnia* (Amsterdam, 1644).

73. Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 148. Note how Whitaker brings immediate inspiration and authenticity together, sixty years ahead of the Confession.

74. Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 187.

immediately inspired, is to be as it were breathed, and to come from the Father by the Holy Ghost, without all means.”⁷⁵ So “to be . . . inspired” is “to be as it were breathed, and to come from the Father by the Holy Ghost,” and to be inspired “immediately” is for that to happen “without all means.” In other words, in the act of inspiration, the words of Scripture “come from the Father by the Holy Ghost” to the writer, being the very Word of God as they are written, just as if (“as it were”) they were being breathed out (2 Tim. 3:16), or uttered, by God himself. This supernatural work of the Spirit upon the mind of the writer takes place “without all means,” or as we would put it today, “without the use of any means.”

Ball adds that “the Holy Scriptures in the originals were inspired both for matter and words.”⁷⁶ That is, the content (meaning) and even the precise words of Scripture, as originally written, were of divine origin and composition. When they were brought from the Father to the human writer by the Holy Spirit, the transfer did not involve any human or other natural means. There was a direct imparting of words and thoughts by the Holy Spirit from the mind of God to the mind of the writer. The words were put in the writer’s mind and were made his thinking without any natural means, any second causes, any intermediate agents, coming between the mind of God and the mind of the writer, be it the teaching of men, research by the writer, or his own pondering of ideas and expressions. As a result, the writers of Scripture wrote out the very words supplied by God. Of course, human means were employed to do the physical writing on the original scrolls or pages of Scripture, and they were written and disseminated by the writers in accordance with their prophetic and apostolic authority, but the words of their texts were entirely of divine composition.

The immediately inspired text of Scripture, then, as it has been “kept pure” down through the centuries, has continued to be the very Word of God (WCF 1.8). Translations of that text, on the other hand, are only mediately inspired because the inspired words of the original Hebrew and Greek texts were reformulated by translators using ordinary means. But to the extent that translations faithfully represent the sense of the originals, they are the Word of God. Thus, they should be made available to the people of God in their native tongues for their edification (1.8).

The Scottish theologian and Bible scholar Robert Rollock (1555?–1599) similarly applies the idea of immediate inspiration. He asks “whether the Scripture be the word of God,” and answers that “the word of God at this day is twofold in the Church of God, 1. immediate, 2. mediate.” Rollock explains that when an inspired message “doth proceed immediately out of God’s own mouth,” the resulting text of Scripture can be called “the immediate word of God,” whereas the preaching of that word can be called the “mediate” word of God since it is mediated by the preacher. Scripture, then, “is that immediate and primary word of God,” taking the place not only of the “lively [*i.e.*, living] voice of God himself” but also of “the secret and unsearchable mind of God, and of God’s unspeakable mysteries.” Scripture supplies “the very mind and counsel of God,” speaking to us “no less certain and firm than if we heard God himself speak, or did behold and read the very mind of God, yea, the very divine oracles

75. Ball, *Short Treatise*, 5–6, 7.

76. Ball, *Short Treatise*, 7–8.

written in God's own breast."⁷⁷ Because of immediate inspiration, the Word of God is not mediated by the writers of Scripture, as it is by translators and preachers.

Warfield says the Confession's phrase "immediately inspired" was "of quite settled and technical connotation," quoting Ball's catechism. As examples of this "settled and technical connotation," Warfield cites passages from the Lutheran systematians Abraham Calov (Calovius) and David Holaz (Hollatius), written subsequent to the Westminster Assembly (Calov, 1655; Hollaz, 1707).⁷⁸ The Reformed theologian Francis Turretin (1623–1687) spoke similarly of "immediate inspiration and the internal impulse of the Holy Spirit" to write Scripture on particular occasions, appealing to 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21.⁷⁹ By that time, Lutheran and Calvinist theologians had gone their separate ways, but their doctrines of inspiration were quite the same.⁸⁰ Let's look now at how the authors most relevant to the Westminster Confession, in addition to Ball, explain immediate inspiration.

At one point, Whitaker addresses the objection that Scripture "does not proceed immediately from God, but is delivered mediately to us through others"—that is, through the biblical writers. He accepts, of course, that "God hath not spoken by himself, but by others," but just as "God inspired the prophets with what they said, and made use of their mouths, tongues, and hands," so also Scripture is "immediately the voice of God" (and specifically of the Holy Spirit), for "the prophets and apostles were only the organs of God."⁸¹ When the apostles wrote, "the Holy Spirit governed their minds . . . and impelled them to writing." The Scriptures "were written not merely by the will and command, but under the very dictation of Christ; nor yet merely occasionally [*i.e.*, for that occasion alone], . . . but with the deliberate purpose of serving the church in all ages."⁸² Immediate inspiration, then, is the work of the Spirit, bringing God's Word directly to his people in the text of Scripture without human mediation in the composition of the text (as with translations), but using inspired writers instrumentally to communicate his Word to the church.

William Perkins, citing 2 Peter 1:21, writes: "The Scripture is the Word of God written in a language appropriate for the church by men who were immediately called to be the clerks or secretaries of the Holy Spirit."⁸³ Perkins also uses the word "immediately" in opposition to the use of "means." Commenting on Galatians 1:12, he says that one can receive instruction either "in schools by the means and ministry

77. Robert Rollock, *A Treatise of Our Effectual Calling*, trans. Henry Holland, in *Select Works of Robert Rollock*, ed. William M. Gunn, 2 vols. (1603; Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1844–1849), 1:64–65.

78. Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 204. Warfield took these quotations from *Die Inspiration und Irrthumslosigkeit der heiligen Schrift*, by Aug. Wilh. Dieckhoff (Leipzig: Justus Naumann, 1891), 7 (Holaz) and 7 n. 1 (Calov), which he was reading for a book review.

79. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (1679; Phillipsburg, NJ: 1992–1997), 1:60.

80. For the Lutheran side, see Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the 17th-Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955, 1957).

81. Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 296.

82. Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 527, 528.

83. William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying with The Calling of the Ministry* (1606; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 12–13.

of men” or by “immediate revelation.”⁸⁴ Also illustrating this terminology, William Gouge, whom Van Dixhoorn calls “a Puritan patriarch at the Westminster assembly,”⁸⁵ complains that enthusiasts claim the privilege of “immediate inspiration and revelation” and thus reject all “means of attaining knowledge.”⁸⁶

Edward Leigh, a Bible scholar and member of Parliament from 1645 to 1648, explains immediate inspiration like this: “The author of the *Scriptures* was God himself, they came from him in a special and peculiar manner, commonly called inspiration, which is an act of God’s Spirit immediately imprinting or infusing those notions into their brains, and those phrases and words by which the notions were uttered.” “They did not write these things of their own heads,” Leigh adds, “but the Spirit of God did move and work them to it, and in it.”⁸⁷

Scottish commissioner Samuel Rutherford can hardly discuss inspiration without using the word *immediately*. The biblical writers, he says, “are agents inspired with the Holy Spirit, immediately breathing on them in prophesying and in writing Scripture.” Thus, Moses and indeed “all” the canonical writers, “in the making of laws and divine institutions,” are “mere patients [*i.e.*, passive recipients], as the people are.” That is, the writers of Scripture were no more involved in the composition of their texts than the people who heard them read. Moses, for example, was the “proclaimer” of the law but had “no influence in making the law.” The writers “were only to receive the word at God’s mouth and to hear it . . . as mere servants.” The church today, Rutherford states, does not have “the same immediately inspired spirit, that the prophets and apostles had.” He doubts “if the Lord did ever give any power of adding to his Scripture at all, without his own immediate inspiration, to either prophet or apostle.” God never commanded them “to write canonical Scripture of their own head.” Rather, he gave them “an immediate inspiration, which essentially did include every syllable and word that the apostles and prophets were to write.” In their writing of Scripture, “they were immediately inspired, as touching the matter, words, phrases, expression, order, method, majesty, style, and all,” being “but organs, the mouth, pen, and amanuenses.”⁸⁸

Rogers supposes that “Rutherford is driven to a dictation theory of inspiration” when he adds to the sentence just quoted, “God as it were immediately dyting [*i.e.*, dictating], and leading their hand at the pen.”⁸⁹ But Rogers ignores the words “as it were,” which indicate that the result of immediate inspiration on the writer was *the same as if* God had dictated words to him and physically guided his pen. Some have

84. William Perkins, *Commentary on Galatians*, ed. Paul M. Smalley, in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 44.

85. Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 6.

86. Gouge, *Hebrews*, 2:199.

87. Edward Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity* (London, 1654), 6.

88. Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church-Government and Excommunication* (London, 1646), 62, 65, 66.

89. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 299, quoting Rutherford, *Divine Right of Church-Government*, 66.

pictured the biblical writers taking dictation from an angelic or divine voice, but most who have spoken of dictation (e.g., John Calvin, commenting on 2 Tim. 3:16) have had in mind an internal operation of the Holy Spirit, putting words and sentences of divine composition into the mind of the writer, making those thoughts and any attending emotions his. Rogers asserts that Rutherford takes “the most extreme position” of those at the Assembly,⁹⁰ but in fact, he simply takes the common view and works it out in more detail than most.

Although the relevant writings of John Owen (1616–1683) were published too late to influence the Westminster Divines, he did give full expression to their concept of immediate inspiration. The laws promulgated, the stories told, and the instructions and prophecies given by the prophets in the Old Testament, he said, “were not their own, not conceived in their minds, not formed by their reasonings, not retained in their memories from what they had heard, not by any means beforehand comprehended by them,” but rather “were all of them immediately from God—there being only a passive concurrence of their rational faculties in their reception.” And “what hath been spoken of the scripture of the Old Testament, must be also affirmed of the New.”⁹¹

As the Westminster Assembly was beginning its work on the Confession, Hugh Binning, at the age of eighteen, was beginning his professorship of philosophy at the University of Glasgow, and three years later, he accepted a call to be the minister at Govan (then outside Glasgow). Before his untimely death at age 26, he wrote in *The Common Principles of the Christian Religion* that “the Holy Scriptures . . . are immediately inspired of God.” That is (citing 2 Pet. 1:21), “God by his Spirit, as it were, acted the part of the soul, in the prophets and apostles; and they did no more but utter what the Spirit conceived. The Holy Ghost inspired the matter and the words.” The writers “needed no debate, no search in their own minds, for the truth, no inquisition for light, but light shined upon their souls so brightly, so convincingly, that it puts it beyond all question, that it was the mind and voice of God.”⁹² Hugh Binning thus eloquently expresses the confessional view of immediate inspiration.

In more modern English expression, “directly” is a suitable synonym for “immediately,” as the word is used here in the Confession,⁹³ but it is important to bear in mind that this means “without all means” (Ball). Immediate inspiration is the direct work of the Holy Spirit upon the biblical writer, not indirect work through the ordinary means of human composition. A. A. Hodge ignores the word “immediately” in discussing chapter 1 of the Confession, but in his remarks on the related subject of

90. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 298.

91. John Owen, *The Divine Original of the Scripture* [1659], in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 16 vols. (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 16:298, 305.

92. Hugh Binning, *The Works of the Pious, Reverend and Learn'd Mr. Hugh Binning*, ed. Patrick Gillespie (1660; Edinburgh, 1735), 15.

93. See Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 144; John H. Gerstner, Douglas F. Kelly, and Philip Rollinson, *A Guide: The Westminster Confession of Faith: Commentary* (Signal Mountain, TN: Summertown Texts, 1992), 18; The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *The Westminster Confession of Faith with a Parallel Modern English Study Version* (Norcross, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1993), 11.

providence and miracles, he observes that “God possesses the power of effecting his ends immediately, without the intervention of second causes.”⁹⁴ “Second causes” is simply another term for “means” (see 5.2, 3).

The Confession uses the word *immediately*, not only with reference to inspiration, but also with reference to the sacraments. It states that the sacraments were “immediately instituted by God” (27.1), citing Matthew 28:19 for baptism and 1 Corinthians 11:23 for the Lord’s Supper. In each passage, the Lord Jesus, dealing directly with the apostles without any intermediation, institutes a sacrament. The choice of 1 Corinthians 11:23 (instead of a passage from the Gospels) is instructive because the verse is interpreted to mean that Paul received the words of institution directly from the risen Lord himself, not by means of apostolic teaching or church tradition. Van Dixhoorn comments that it is clear from the Scriptures that the sacraments “were given directly by God,”⁹⁵ and we should likewise understand the Confession to teach that the words of Scripture were given directly by God. God was the sole author of the sacraments and the sole author of the Scriptures; both were given immediately by God to his people.

Robert Letham gives the words “immediately inspired” needed attention in his book on the Westminster Assembly. He starts well enough, in words reminiscent of Ball: “The phrase ‘immediately inspired’ (1.8) denotes that the Father breathed Scripture out by the Holy Spirit without human means *in the origination* of the original manuscripts.”⁹⁶ The Divines would accept this explanation if, by “*in the origination* of the original manuscripts,” Letham meant the Spirit’s work of putting the words of the original texts directly into the minds of the writers, but instead he seems to limit the “origination” of Scripture to its origin in the mind of God: “The composition of Scripture was by human hands, and it flowed from human thought and sometimes historical research, but its ultimate origin was entirely from God.”⁹⁷ But it was precisely the composition of Scripture “by human hands,” flowing “from human thought,” that the Divines meant to preclude by using the words “immediately inspired.” The content of Scripture did indeed originate in the mind of God, but immediate inspiration refers to its direct transfer to the minds of its writers as they wrote, without the means of human compositional activity. When Letham discusses immediate inspiration a second time, he again inserts the notion of the writers’ compositional activity into the Confession. After explaining immediate inspiration properly to mean that “the Scriptures as first penned were directly inspired by the Holy Spirit,” he asserts in apparent contradiction: “It would be idle to argue that the divines discounted human authorship.”⁹⁸ Actually, it would be idle to argue the opposite, as we have seen.

94. A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (1869; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 98.

95. Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 359.

96. Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 129.

97. Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 129.

98. Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 144–45.

5. Human Composition Considered

The Westminster Divines, as we have seen, were committed to the view that Scripture, as the Word of God, was entirely the product of immediate inspiration. God alone was held to be the author of Scripture, leaving no room for human authorship. This was the dominant view of Reformed scholarship, with roots in the patristic and medieval periods, and proceeded from John Calvin forward in Reformed theology.⁹⁹ Calvin, for example, comments on 2 Timothy 3:16, “We owe to the Scripture the same reverence as we owe to God, since it has its only source in Him and has nothing of human origin mixed with it.” This is a matter of great importance for Calvin, for he insists that it is “a settled principle,” for “all those who wish to profit from the Scriptures,” that its teachings “are not . . . produced by men’s minds as their source, but are dictated by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁰ The Divines, no less than Calvin, understood that the writings of Scripture were issued by the prophetic and apostolic authority of their writers, as expressions of the teaching they had received from God, but also that the very words they wrote to express that teaching were given to them by the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Meanwhile, the Renaissance and the Reformation, spurred on by the printing press, the splintering of ecclesiastical authority, and the multiplication of educational institutions, led to widespread study of the Bible, increasingly from a literary and historical perspective, with weakening confessional, theological, and ecclesiastical boundaries. From a growing humanistic viewpoint, already by the seventeenth century, certain literary phenomena of the Scriptures, such as differences in style among the biblical writers and their expressions of personality, pointed to human compositional activity. There was no need to see the hand of God at work (apart, perhaps, from providence in the background), except where the human authors needed it. In orthodox Christian circles, the first break from the traditional view of inspiration came from theologians who reasoned that when a biblical writer was writing material previously unknown to him, inspiration must have provided what was to be written, but when he was writing material already known to him, the Spirit only had to influence him so as to ensure that he wrote without making any mistakes.

For example, in the influential Leiden Synopsis (1625, republished 1632, 1642), Dutch theologian Antonius Thysius (1565–1640) states in Disputation 3 that “sometimes God was the one who inspired and dictated,” but that “at other times God assisted and directed” while the writers of Scripture worked as “interpreters and authors” who “applied their own intellect, mental activities and processes, recollection, order of the arguments, and their own style of writing (from where comes the variety of writing-styles among them),” at which time the Spirit “directed and guided them to such an extent that they were kept from every error in thought,

99. See Muller, *PRRD*, 2:234–39.

100. John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. A. Smail, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 330.

memory, word and pen.”¹⁰¹ A similar account is given by William Ames (1576–1633), who had fled from repression in England and was teaching in the Netherlands when he released *Medulla theologiae* (1627), an English translation of which was printed prior to the Westminster Assembly by order of the House of Commons and no doubt had some currency among the Divines. He distinguishes between an inspiration of dictation for matters previously unknown to the writers and an inspiration of assistance for matters already known to them.¹⁰² However, the direction and assistance provided by the Holy Spirit with respect to matters already known by the writers could still be understood as the provision of the very words for them to write on those matters. That is the view of Dutch theologian Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706), for, after quoting Ames’s statement about God assisting the writers who already had knowledge of what they were writing, he goes on to say that “God composed Scripture . . . by inspiring it,” and “in all things . . . God not only inspired the matters themselves, but he also dictated the individual words.”¹⁰³ Mastricht thus fits the new attention given to the writers into the old mold of immediate inspiration. However, Thysius argues that when revelation was not necessary to convey the information needed by the biblical writer, the Holy Spirit’s role changed from that of an author and immediate inspirer to that of an editor who deftly influenced the human author’s mental processes, directing his work and preventing errors from being included in his composition. Thus, on this view, some portions of Scripture were immediately inspired, while others simply benefitted from divine assistance.¹⁰⁴

The Divines were not unaware of the efforts being made by some to incorporate human authorship into a more complex view of the origin of Scripture, but these

101. *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae: Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, vol. 1, *Disputations 1–23*, ed. Dolf te Velde, trans. Riemer A. Faber (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 77. Faber demonstrates that Thysius was the author of the Synopsis disputations over which he presided, beginning with Disputation 3, in “Intellectual Property in the Era of Reformed Orthodoxy: Questions of Authorship in the *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*,” *WTJ* 82 (2020): 61–75. Cf. John Weemse, in *Exercitationes Divine* (London, 1632), esp. pp. 72–74.

102. William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* (London, 1639, 1642), 1.34.5–6, pp. 148–49. See also the revised translation in *The Marrow of Theology*, ed. John D. Eusden (1968; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 185–87.

103. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theological-Practical Theology* [2nd ed., 1699], ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester, 7 vols. planned (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018–), 1.1.2.12–13, pp. 1:125–26. What Ames says about “all those things which were made known by supernatural inspiration” being dictated (*Marrow*, 1.34.6, p. 149) he does not apply to the things already known, but Mastricht says the same thing, even using much of Ames’s own language, about “all things” in Scripture (1.1.2.13, p. 1:126)! Mastricht declares “God” (apart from “the amanuenses”) to be the “author” of Scripture, making it “the Word of God” (1.1.2.12, 1:125). But when he then refers to God as its “principal cause,” Muller interprets that as “primary author” (*PRRD*, 2:245), implying that the amanuenses were secondary authors, but Mastricht does not give them any compositional role; God was the efficient cause, the writers were the instrumental cause.

104. A strict view of uniformly immediate, verbal inspiration continued to be powerfully advocated by many Reformed theologians, but increasingly loose views were advocated and eventually became dominant after the age of Reformed orthodoxy. Cf. Muller, *PRRD*, 2:248–55.

efforts received rebuttal in the Confession only by implication (as befitting a confessional, not disputational, document). As we have seen expressed in the Confession, the Divines considered the exclusively divine authorship and immediate inspiration of all Scripture to be necessary in order for it to be wholly the Word of God. So, if literary differences are manifested in different portions of Scripture, it must be because the writers were inspired so to write. And when the Holy Spirit gave the writers words to write, it did not matter to what extent they had previous knowledge of the subject matter.

The Divines explained the diversity manifested in the Scriptures as harmonious variation within the unity of the Word of God. For example, the Confession speaks of “the consent [*i.e.*, agreement] of all the parts” (1.5), which Scottish commissioner George Gillespie describes as “the marvelous consent of all parts and passages (though written by diverse and several penmen).”¹⁰⁵ Whitaker likewise says that the writers of Scripture were “various” and “many,” but “the one Spirit under whose direction and dictation they wrote” guarantees the unity and harmony of Scripture.¹⁰⁶

Despite the Confession’s clear statement on the harmony of Scripture, Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim quote a long passage from Scottish commissioner Robert Baillie in which he corrects the usual English translation of a passage of Scripture by an analysis of the original Hebrew, even though that results in an apparently theologically discordant translation. Rogers and McKim assert that this one example sets the work of “the Divines” in general in “sharp contrast” to those who later “strove to harmonize every text.”¹⁰⁷ What Rogers and McKim fail to mention is that in the next paragraph, Baillie explains in detail how the correct translation is to be understood in harmony with the rest of Scripture!

Just as the Confession speaks of “the consent of all the parts,” so also it speaks of “the majesty of the style” that only Scripture, being the Word of God, can exhibit (1.5). This can be asserted only if the stylistic differences manifested by the writers of Scripture are aspects of an overall majestic style that comes from divine inspiration, comparable to the different facets of a diamond. Rutherford explains that “immediate inspiration” determined the words, expression, and “style”—indeed, “all” aspects of the text. The Lord, he says, did not authorize the writers of Scripture, some of whom were “unlettered men,” simply to “write words and style as they pleased.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, any variation in style is to be traced to the immediate inspiration of the words exhibiting it. The Spirit gave each portion of Scripture whatever characteristics were appropriate for the divine author, the human writer, the intended audience, and the message to be conveyed.

In this connection, Rutherford draws attention to a comment on 2 Timothy 3:16 by the Jesuit Cornelius à Lapide (1567–1637), who states that some things in Scripture were revealed directly to the writers, while other things had already been learned by them. “Yet,” Rutherford observes, another Catholic commentator on the passage,

105. George Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Edinburgh, 1649), 250.

106. Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 661.

107. Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation*, 212.

108. Rutherford, *Divine Right of Church-Government*, 66. See also Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 294.

Gulielmus Estius (1542–1613), states that “the Scriptures are given by divine inspiration” in such a fashion that “not only the sentences, but every word, and the order and disposition of words is of, or from God, as if he were speaking and writing himself.”¹⁰⁹ Using one Catholic writer against another (and against Catholicism in the larger context), Rutherford argues that the words of Scripture, with all of their characteristics, whether conveying a message previously understood by the writer or not, were immediately inspired in the same manner. “Style” and “personality” are not separate from the words of the text; if God immediately inspired the words, then he inspired the style that characterizes them and their expressions of personality. The Westminster Divines did not see these phenomena of Scripture as presenting a problem to their understanding of inspiration.

We have found no evidence in the writings of those who wrote chapter 1 of the Confession, or of any other participant in the Assembly, or of those who influenced them, that any one of them believed that human compositional activity played any part in the writing of the Word of God. Muller, however, asserts that John Lightfoot, a learned Bible scholar at the Assembly, was able to “balance a strict view of inspiration with a strong sense of human activity in the writing of Scripture.”¹¹⁰ But what kind of “human activity”? The Divines did not deny that the mental faculties of the writers were operative before and during their writing under inspiration, but they did deny that any of their uninspired thinking contributed to the text of Scripture. Muller, however, points to a comment by Lightfoot on Luke’s preface as evidence to the contrary. If Muller were correct in his assessment, that comment would be completely out of character for Lightfoot to make. After writing fifty-three quotation-packed pages demonstrating that “Lightfoot held the highest conceivable doctrine of verbal inspiration,” Warfield concludes: “It is perfectly evident that his fundamental conception of Scripture was that it is the Book of God, the ‘dictates of the Holy Spirit,’ of every part and every element of which—its words and its very letters—God is Himself the responsible author.”¹¹¹ It turns out that Lightfoot interprets Luke 1:1 to be saying that previous compilers of the gospel traditions (writing prior to the canonical gospels) meant well, but were not inspired and fell short: “Our evangelist, therefore, takes care to weigh such kind of writings, in such a balance, as that it may appear they are neither rejected by him as false or heretical, nor yet received as divine and canonical.”¹¹² According to Muller, this sentence expresses “Luke’s own critical activity” undertaken as part of the writing process being superintended by God.¹¹³ Lightfoot would agree that Luke is giving his assessment of the previous narratives, which he may well have held before writing his gospel, but he would insist that Luke’s words expressing that assessment were given to him to write by the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Warfield remarks on a passage in another work by Lightfoot that comments on Luke’s preface: “Here inspiration is made to include an

109. Rutherford, *Divine Right of Church-Government*, 65.

110. Muller, *PRRD*, 2:251.

111. Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 279, 332.

112. John Lightfoot, *Horæ hebraicæ et talmudicæ; or, Hebrew and Talmudical Exercitations upon the Gospels of St. Luke and St. John* [1684], in *Works*, ed. Pitman, 12:5–6.

113. Muller, *PRRD*, 2:251.

injunction from God to write, and the reception from above of what is to be written; so that the writing is ‘from the mouth and dictating’ of God”—“the conception everywhere cropping out more or less fully” in Lightfoot’s writings.¹¹⁴

Contrary to what we have shown to be the Westminster Assembly’s doctrine of divine authorship and immediate inspiration, with its rejection of any human composition of Scripture, Rogers presents a few quotations intended to support his claim that “for the Westminster Divines” inspiration does not “eliminate the contribution which the human authors made to the written Scripture.”¹¹⁵ His evidence for this has been cherry-picked and is so slight that, even if his interpretation of it were correct, it could easily be dismissed as occasional carelessness of expression due to the fact that the biblical writers did express their (Spirit-given) thoughts, and so could understandably be described as having formulated them. But Rogers consistently misinterprets his evidence.

First, Rogers draws attention to a sermon by Thomas Gataker on the acrostic Psalm 34, titled “Davids Instructor.” To put this sermon in context, we should note that Rogers himself mentions several (and indeed “numerous”) instances in which Gataker treats the words of Scripture as the words of the Holy Spirit speaking directly.¹¹⁶ For example, in the sermon we are considering, Gataker says, when characterizing several passages of Scripture, “So the Holy Ghost describes the manner of God’s saints, quickening, calling on, and encouraging either other.”¹¹⁷ In other words, whatever the biblical writer says, however wise or however skillful, is in fact the speaking of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, Rogers makes much of the fact that Gataker also says that in the acrostic psalms, “the Holy Ghost’s pleasure was, that the penmen thereof, should take more pains than usual, and more art than ordinary should be shown, in the framing and contriving [*i.e.*, constructing] of them.”¹¹⁸ Rogers interprets this passage as showing Gataker’s appreciation for “the skill of the writer” as an example of “the contribution of the human authors.”¹¹⁹ In fact, however, Gataker expressly attributes the composing of the acrostic psalms to “the Holy Ghost’s pleasure,” not to the psalmists’ creativity. The special effort and skill exhibited in the writing of acrostics was, in Gataker’s view, due to the creative work of the inspiring Spirit.

Rogers also calls attention to Gataker’s observation that the psalmists “pour out their souls” to God.¹²⁰ None of the Divines would have questioned that, but they would also have said that the psalmists did so with songs of divine composition (perhaps citing 2 Sam. 23:1–3), just as the apostles poured out their souls when brought to trial, using words directly supplied by the Holy Spirit at the time (Mark 13:11). Why would the inspiring Spirit not formulate thoughts and words in the minds of the writers that were appropriate to what they were experiencing in their lives and ministries?

114. Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 289.

115. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 301.

116. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 300, 300 n. 248.

117. Thomas Gataker, “Davids Instructor” (London, 1620), 4.

118. Gataker, “Davids Instructor,” 2.

119. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 300.

120. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 300 n. 246.

Based on his scanty evidence, Rogers then generalizes: “The Westminster Divines generally treat Scripture as fully divine and fully human.” He proceeds to cite supposedly supporting quotations from four members of the drafting committee, all but the last of which refer only to divine authorship; he even quotes Charles Herle as referring to the “immediate inspiration of the H. G.”¹²¹ In his final example, the only one that might seem to suggest what Rogers calls “the very human contribution of the Scriptural writers,” Edward Reynolds comments on the words “saith the preacher” in Ecclesiastes 1:2: “Both by inspiration, as a penman of the Holy Ghost: and by experience, as one who had learned dearly, and to his cost.”¹²² By referring to the writer first as the inspired penman of the Holy Spirit, Reynolds aligns himself with the confessional view of inspiration and makes that the context for understanding the preacher’s personal comments. By then saying that the writer speaks from experience, Reynolds indicates that the words given to the preacher by inspiration, and thus written by him, express lessons (as God would want them expressed) that he has learned from his life. The Divines understood immediate inspiration as the giving of words to the writers that were appropriate for them to say in their personal situations.

Rogers claims to have carefully searched the writings of the drafting committee members to find passages that would shed light on the Confession’s doctrine of inspiration, and he considers Reynolds to have played the most important role in the Confession’s composition.¹²³ So let us see what Reynolds says about inspiration that Rogers inexplicably overlooks. Commenting on Ecclesiastes 1:1, Reynolds says that the preacher (Solomon), after a lifetime of gaining wisdom, “lastly” (in writing Ecclesiastes) was “instructed by God, an inspired person, and called out to publish this.”¹²⁴ Commenting on Ecclesiastes 12:11, Reynolds says that “the word” (i.e., Scripture) “hath its original from one principal shepherd,” namely Christ, who “by his spirit inspired it.” That is, “the Holy Scriptures” were “delivered by inspiration unto the penmen thereof for the use of the church; the spirit of Christ being in those that wrote them.”¹²⁵ “All holy Scripture,” Reynolds declares, was “by the Spirit dictated unto holy and selected instruments,” who were “inspired with more abundance of grace, and guided by a full and infallible spirit.”¹²⁶ The Holy Spirit would “reveal truth” to the prophets and apostles, Reynolds says, either “in a way of simple enthusiasm” (as they spoke) or “by divine and immediate inspiration” (as they wrote).¹²⁷ There is no reason to think that Reynolds understood “immediate inspiration” any differently than Rutherford did. The words of Scripture were, he said,

121. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 300–1.

122. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 301, quoting Reynolds, “Annotations on the Book of Ecclesiastes,” in *Whole Works*, ed. Pitman, 4:42.

123. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 175–76, 440.

124. Reynolds, “Annotations on the Book of Ecclesiastes,” in *Whole Works*, ed. Pitman, 4:37.

125. Reynolds, “Annotations on the Book of Ecclesiastes,” in *Whole Works*, ed. Pitman, 4:254.

126. Edward Reynolds, *An Exposition of the Hundred and Tenth Psalm* [1632], in *Whole Works*, ed. Pitman, 2:36.

127. Edward Reynolds, “Brotherly Reconciliation” [1657], in *Whole Works*, ed. Pitman, 5:152–53.

“delivered by inspiration unto the penmen thereof”—indeed, “dictated” to them by the Spirit.

John Ball, the popularizer of immediate inspiration, readily acknowledges that each prophet and apostle has a particular style. Still, he insists that “all are divine”—that is, all are of divine origin. There are different literary styles in the Bible because the Holy Spirit took into account “the dignity of the speaker,” “the nature of the argument,” and “the capacity and condition of them for whose sake it was written.”¹²⁸

The member of the Assembly who in the most detail seeks to explain the differences in style among the biblical writers is John White. He says the Scriptures “were written by the direction of the Holy Spirit,” who supplied the writers with “the very phrases, method, and whole order of those things” they needed. Inspiration excluded “the working of the natural faculties of man’s mind altogether” (in a creative capacity) “so that both the understanding, and will of man, as far as they were merely natural, had nothing to do in this holy work, save only to understand, and approve that which was dictated by God himself.” But, he asks, if the Spirit “framed the very phrase and style wherein the Scriptures were written,” then why do we find that some writers, like Amos, write “in a rude and more unpolished style,” whereas others, like Isaiah, write “in a more elegant phrase”? Why do some, like Paul, exhibit “art and learning in their writings,” whereas others, like James, “write in a more vulgar way”? White answered that the Holy Spirit provided words to the writers that were appropriate for them to speak in their particular circumstances. In order not to alter “the phrase and manner of speaking, wherewith custom and education had acquainted those that wrote the Scriptures,” the Spirit, when he “speaks his own words,” White reasons, “chooses out of their [reservoir of] words and phrases such as were fit for his own purpose.” And in doing so, he “drew their natural style to a higher pitch, in divine expressions, fitted to the subject at hand.”¹²⁹ In other words, God accommodated his inspired word to the level of his intended audience and the language and literary standards of his prepared and chosen writers. But in doing so, he retained complete control of the composition of the inspired text, excluding any input from the writers, and even provided them with words that elevated their typical writing styles.

The diversity in Scripture, whether in content, expression, or style, then, was explained by the Westminster Divines as due to the deliberate effort of the Holy Spirit to give words to the writers that were well suited to them, in each of their circumstances as leaders of God’s people. These writers were not thought of as taking dictation as would be done by a stenographer, simply writing out words being expressed by someone else. Instead, when the Spirit put words and thoughts into their minds, they experienced spiritual enlightenment, making God’s words their own so that, even when they wrote in the first person, they truly expressed their minds as the

128. Ball, *Short Treatise*, 32.

129. John White, *A Way to the Tree of Life* (London, 1647), 59–62. Richard A. Muller quotes White’s statement about the Spirit not altering the writers’ “manner of speaking” as if some human compositional input were being recognized (“Inspired by God—Pure in All Ages,” 47), but he fails to note White’s explanation that the Spirit selected words and phrases in different styles for different writers, without their minds getting involved in the composition of what they wrote.

Spirit had informed and verbally shaped them. In this manner, the Divines fleshed out the implications of immediate inspiration. They preserved the divine authorship of the Word of God, explaining the diversity of Scripture without compromising its divine origin and authority.

6. Providence, Means, and Inspiration

By attributing the wording of Scripture to the direct action of the Holy Spirit on its writers and separating its divine composition from natural causation, the Confession in chapter 1, “Of the Holy Scripture,” especially by speaking of immediate inspiration, anticipates the discussion of God’s use and nonuse of means in chapter 5, “Of Providence.” That chapter speaks of God’s “ordinary providence,” in which he “maketh use of means” (i.e., “second causes,” 5.2), but adds that he sometimes works “without, above, and against them at his pleasure” (5.3).

The language used with reference to inspiration in chapter 1 leaves little doubt but that the Holy Spirit’s work of inspiration was viewed by the Westminster Divines as an example of God’s working, in the language of chapter 5, “without” any “means,” “at his pleasure.” First, divine inspiration is rooted in the fact that “it pleased the Lord” to commit his revealed will to writing (1.1). Second, the Scriptures are stated to have been “immediately” inspired by God (1.8)—that is, inspired “without all means” (Ball)—meaning that the Spirit’s work of inspiration was done without any second causes being employed. That would place inspiration in the category of God’s work done “without, above, and against” any “means” (5.3).¹³⁰

One of the Assembly’s three proof texts for God’s working “without” means is Matthew 4:4, “But he answered, ‘It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’” Here Jesus responds to the devil’s first of three temptations by quoting Scripture (Deut. 8:3) and obeying it. In all three temptations, Jesus responds by quoting Scripture, showing that it has become the chief source of “every word that comes from the mouth of God” for the people of God. Matthew 4:4 illustrates God’s working without means because Jesus applies the general reference to “every word that comes from the mouth of God” specifically to Scripture. The words of Scripture, Jesus indicates, come directly from God as his utterance (i.e., “from the mouth of God”). That refers, the Divines would say, to the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in which God works without means.

In their use of this proof text, we see that, for the Westminster Divines, the inspiration of Scripture was a prime example of how God has worked without means—outside ordinary providence. In the words of one of the drafters of the Confession, “the Efficient Cause” of Scripture is “God and Christ,” who are “the Author of it,” making it “truth.”¹³¹ In the Confession’s doctrine of inspiration, there is room only for divine authorship, immediate inspiration without the use of means, the

130. Similarly, the Confession distinguishes “extraordinary revelation” from “ordinary means” (18.3).

131. Anthony Burgess, *Sermons upon the Gospel according to St. John* (London, 1656), 474.

speaking of the Holy Spirit, and the written Word of God. The inspired men did not compose what they wrote, as uninspired writers do.

7. Concluding Reflections

Up to this point, our purpose has been to examine the Westminster Confession of Faith in the light of its historical context and to determine what it means by and says about the inspiration of Scripture—not to argue for or against its teaching. But briefly now, after summarizing our findings, we will look at its doctrine of inspiration from where we stand today—again, not arguing for or against it, but urging that it be considered carefully, for the concerns of the Westminster Divines remain with us. Their teaching presents a powerful challenge to the thinking of our day.

We have seen that foundational to the Westminster Confession, as a Scripture-based confession, is the conviction that God is the author of the Scriptures and, as such, has communicated his authoritative Word to his people by means of the Holy Spirit's work in the biblical writers known as inspiration. In the Confession's initial chapter, Scripture is described as "immediately inspired by God" (1.8), which means that it has been inspired directly by God, without human mediation or contribution. When all the relevant passages of the Confession are put together and examined closely, it becomes clear that, according to the Confession, the Holy Spirit gave the words of Scripture immediately to its writers without involving the ordinary (i.e., providential) means of human composition. As explained in the writings of the Divines, especially those who drafted the text of chapter 1 of the Confession, joined by their mentors and like-minded contemporaries, the Spirit put divinely composed and situationally appropriate thoughts and words directly into the minds of the biblical writers, making those thoughts and words theirs to be written down in their prophetic and apostolic capacities and subsequently distributed and permanently preserved for God's people. Accordingly, God is the sole author of Scripture—that is, its originator and composer—without any human contribution other than to receive, accept, and write it. Scripture's divine authorship, in turn, makes it the very Word of God, completely true and infallibly authoritative, which justifies and indeed requires its use as the source for the system of doctrine summarized in the Confession and our guide in all matters of faith and life.

That all of this is embedded in the Confession may come as a surprise. After all, there is not a section or even a sentence in it that states the doctrine of immediate inspiration in any detail. However, all the details did not need to be spelled out in one comprehensive statement because the nature of inspiration was widely agreed upon when the Confession was written, and it was not a subject of controversy between competing ecclesiastical bodies. For similar reasons, other important matters that are often disputed today, such as the nature of Christ's resurrection, are not given special attention in the Confession. Inspiration was widely understood when the Confession was written to be an "immediate" divine act, but that term eventually fell into disuse as views of biblical origins evolved. It is no wonder, then, that most modern readers have not recognized the doctrine of immediate inspiration in the Confession, even in the words "immediately inspired."

So what should we make of the Westminster Confession's doctrine of inspiration? Many will regard it simply as a historical curiosity left behind by centuries of development in theology and biblical studies. As a result of that development, it is difficult in our day to agree with the Divines' denial of human authorship. Many Presbyterian, Reformed, and other theologians and Bible scholars committed to the authority of Scripture have regarded human compositional activity as a given and have endeavored to integrate it into a doctrine of inspiration in such a fashion that the canonical writings can still be regarded as the infallible Word of God. In this endeavor, one thinks especially of the influential work of Benjamin B. Warfield (*concursum*) and Herman Bavinck (organic inspiration). But we must remember that the Divines were gifted and godly men with a deep knowledge of the Scriptures, and their understanding of inspiration was the standard view of Reformed orthodoxy. The world may have changed since their day, but the Scriptures have not changed, so their understanding of the scriptural teaching on inspiration continues to deserve serious attention.

We must also remember that not just "inspiration" in some vague or general sense, but immediate inspiration specifically, provides the foundation for the Confession's doctrine of Scripture and thus for its entire system of doctrine derived from Scripture. If the foundation of divine authorship is compromised and immediacy is lost, how can the superstructure of infallibility, inerrancy, and divine authority still stand? The confessional understanding of immediate inspiration raises profound and challenging questions for those who endeavor in this modern world to be scriptural in their thinking. We will now present three sets of such questions. We do not have space to address them here, but the reader is encouraged to ponder them.

First, *does* the Bible actually teach that Scripture is immediately inspired, as the Divines thought it clearly does? A proper assessment must be based upon a careful and thorough study of the many passages of Scripture that directly or indirectly address this subject. The Divines were not infallible, but they were immersed in the Scriptures; it should not be supposed that their view of the biblical doctrine of inspiration can be easily dismissed. Attention must also be given to the so-called historical, literary, and personal phenomena of Scripture, but without allowing humanistic preconceptions of them to undermine what Scripture says about itself. The Divines were aware of these phenomena and endeavored to explain them, but were they on the right track?

Second, if the Bible *does not* teach that it is immediately inspired, is there another view of inspiration that actually is taught by the Bible or is at least consistent with it? In particular, can divine and human authorship be combined in a way that does not compromise either one? Is it really possible that thoughts formulated by fallible and sinful human authors, however much influenced by a mysterious divine hand, can be infallible and morally perfect when committed to writing? Or would such divine influence have to be so overpowering as to render any notion of real human authorship untenable?

Third, if the Bible *does* teach that it is immediately inspired, what are the implications of that for those who are willing to accept biblical teaching? Modern scholarship assumes that the biblical writings are to be explained as the product of natural (secondary) causes and ordinary authorial activity, involving the writers' (and

their editors') cultural background, education, religious experiences, sources of information, learning, circumstances, personality, and mental processes. But is not the doctrine of immediate inspiration opposed in principle to such scholarship? If the Confession is correct, is not much that is regarded today as acceptable and even settled about the Bible in need of reassessment?

These questions are not quickly or easily answered. They must be wrestled with, and the correct answers need to be found, if the Word of God is to be understood properly and biblical and theological scholarship is to proceed on a solidly scriptural basis.