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Westminster and Contemporary Reformed Hermeneutics

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This year marks my 28th year of serving as a teaching elder, first in the Reformed Presbyterian Church and then in the PCA. It also marks my 21st and last year of serving as a full time professor at Reformed Theological Seminary. These bodies that I have served — the PCA, RPCES and Reformed Theological Seminary — have at least two things in common. First, they have drawn much of their theological orientation from a revival of historical Calvinism in the 1920's and 1930's under the leadership of J. Greshem Machen. Machen and his associates form what I often call the neo-Calvinist or American neo-Calvinist movement. Second, they have required their teachers to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter "Westminster" or "the Confession"). They have required this subscription on the belief that the Confession contains the system of doctrine taught in Scripture. This confessional tradition is not the tradition in which I was raised, but it is the tradition that I have identified as my theological home as an adult believer for all these twenty-something years.

Now my assigned task (not a task of choice) today is to speak to you of an issue that's related to the conference title *The Westminster Confession Today.* And I have entitled my presentation "Westminster and Contemporary Reformed Hermeneutics." The thesis of my presentation is rather straightforward, so I can give it to you very quickly. I am convinced that in our neo-Calvinist branch of the church, hermeneutical discussions are at a crossroads. I am also convinced that the wisdom of our heritage, reflected in the Confession, has the ability to guide us through many of the choices we are going to have to make in the field of hermeneutics in the not too distant future.

It goes without saying that the Confession touches on biblical

hermeneutics in many different ways, but time is only going to allow us to talk about a few of those ways. And so I'm going to talk about three main issues: first, the divine origin of Scripture; second, the historical reliability of Scripture; third and finally, the harmony of Scripture.

1. Divine Origin of Scripture

The first issue I wish to address is the Confession's stance on the divine origin of Scripture as it compares with tendencies within recent biblical scholarship in our circles.

Now, I think we all know it very well, perhaps too well, that one overriding characteristic of critical biblical scholarship in the modern period has been its emphasis on the human origins of Scripture. In contrast with the patristic, medieval and early reformation periods of the church, the fundamental orientation of modern biblical hermeneutics has been that the Bible is a human book. Awareness of the ancient writers' contexts and their intentions within those historical contexts has been the key that unlocks manifold insights that we now have into the Bible. In their more radical forms, these critical approaches to Scripture have utterly denied any connection at all between God and the Bible. The Scriptures are counted as nothing more than a collection of ancient books whose status does not differ from other ancient Jewish writings like the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, and the assortments of recently discovered texts from Qumran and other lesser known collections. Of course, some critical scholars have tried to rescue the Scriptures for religious use in Jewish and Christian communities by attributing some kind of divine qualities to the Bible. But, by and large, critical biblical hermeneutics has undoubtedly looked at the Bible first and foremost as an ordinary, human book.

Unfortunately, for several generations now biblical scholars in our branch of the church have pursued advanced studies under the tutelage of critical scholars. As a result, viewing Scripture as a human creation has found its way in varying degrees into our circles as well. And as many of you know, I am among those who have this kind of professional training. So, I am convinced that much can be learned about the Bible when we place it in the hands of its human authors. But in recent decades the humanity of the Bible has been stressed so much that the divine origin of the bible has increasingly become a footnote, a secondary qualification, one of those marginal teachings that we add by saying things like, "Oh yeah, I believe that too."

Now, there should be no doubt in our minds that the Scriptures have both divine and human origins. Paul, for instance, not only spoke of all Scripture being "God-breathed" or inspired, as we all know, but also referred to David as the author of Psalm 32 (in Romans chapter 4). We know these facts are true, we know them well and we affirm that both are true. So, my concern today is not

whether or not the Bible should be treated as inspired by God or written by people; both of these are certainly true. My concern is with the ways biblical scholars in our circles have stressed the human origins of Scriptures in ways that have shifted away from the emphasis of our confessional heritage.

As we consider what the Confession says about the divine and human origins of Scripture, it may surprise some of us to realize that the humanity of Scripture is not mentioned a single time in the first chapter of the Confession. I find that to be remarkable. As the Westminster Assembly composed a doctrine of Scripture that reflected its distinctive outlooks, it did not once mention the human origins of Scripture. The only hint of human involvement at all appears in 1.2 where we read that the canonical books were "given by inspiration of God," and 1.8 where we read that they were "inspired by God." But these implicit acknowledgments of human involvement are the only times that the Confession speaks in the first chapter of human involvement. Apart from this, the first chapter of the Confession speaks only of the divine origins of the Scriptures.

At one point Westminster does mention writings of human origin. In 1.3 we read that "The books commonly called the Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration … are of no authority in the Church, nor are to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings." In the language of the Confession "human writings" is a category that applies to writings outside of the Canon. Westminster speaks of the issue in binary terms: there are two kinds of writings in the world: "human writings" and the Bible.

Notice how much the Confession positively stresses the divine origins of Scripture. First, the opening chapter describes the bible as "Holy Scripture," a term that I do not hear very often in our circles, not even in our liturgies. It uses this terminology four times in 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, and 1.5. In 1.2 the expression "Holy Scripture" is closely linked to the expression "the Word of God written." From the Assembly's point of view, the sacred character of Scripture is not derived from the believing community treating it as sacred; it is not a quality granted to Scripture. It is a holiness that derives from the fact that it has its origins in God; the Scriptures share in the holiness of God from whom they come.

In addition to this, the first chapter explicitly acknowledges the divine origins of the Bible by calling it "the Word of God" four times (1.2,4,8), as well as by claiming in 1.6 that "the whole counsel of God … is … set down in Scripture." As we have said, Westminster confesses that the Scriptures are "given by inspiration of God" (1.2) and "inspired by God" (1.8), but one can hardly imagine a more radical way of pointing to the divine origins of Scripture than we find in 1.4. There God is called "the author" of Scripture. Yes, Westminster actually calls God the "author" of the Bible.

Now, what has become a concern of mine during the decades of my ministry is that this confessional orientation has become increasingly absent from

our scholarly discussions of the Bible. I am not at all concerned with the oft quoted comments of men like B.B. Warfield, E.J. Young, John Murray and the like on the importance of the human dimensions of Scripture. That is not my concern here. These men stood boldly both in their professional choices and in their writings for their commitment to the supernatural, divine origins of Scripture in ways that anchored and colored every aspect of their concern for the human origins of the Bible.

On the contrary, my concern is that in recent years the human origins of Scripture have virtually pushed consideration of the divine origins of Scripture off the table. Instead of emphasizing that Scripture is God's word and adding to it the qualification that it came through human instruments, increasingly the focus of many of our scholars has been to emphasize that Scripture is a human book and to add only the occasional aside that it also comes from God.

I can recall years ago as a student how my heart rejoiced when I met or read a critical scholar who made mildly positive gestures toward the idea that the Bible is somehow more than merely human. But now I find myself feeling the same way when I occasionally find subtle gestures in that direction in scholarly writings by our scholars. I understand that our biblical teachers want to distinguish themselves from naïve Christian fundamentalism with its host of simplistic, even docetic, outlooks on the Bible. But frankly, I think that the energy given to this task is misplaced. Rarely have I encountered radical fundamentalism in our denomination. And even when it does appear, I have found that the better way to correct that extreme is to stress the divine origins of Scripture as our basic commitment to which we add other considerations, and not to create doubts about our basic commitment to divine inspiration.

There is a very important hermeneutical observation I want to make at this point. In an imaginary world, we might think that we could approach these issues with perfect balance. But this ideal hardly reflects the reality of our condition. In discussions of many issues, we tend to settle on one orientation as more basic, more central than others. One becomes, as it were, our default drive, that conceptual framework out of which we operate except for those times when some software leads us momentarily to another frame of reference. That default drive, the more basic conceptual framework, determines to a great extent our priorities and our emphases in very significant ways. And the default drive of the Confession is the divine origin of Scripture, not its human origin.

In recent years, a number of scholars have drawn analogies from the doctrine of Christology to help us think through the divine and human origins of Scripture. So, allow me to sum up my views along Christological lines as well.

In Christology we all confess that Jesus was very God and very man. The issue before us is not which of these claims is true, nor is the issue whether or not it is legitimate to emphasize one or the other for strategic purposes at any

given moment. As I am accustomed to saying, “Because the deck of life is always shifting, balance can be nothing more than momentary synchronicity.” No doubt, when dealing with the challenge of docetism, the humanity of Christ should move to center stage. My question is this. Which of these truths does wisdom dictate ought to be the more basic conceptual frame of reference out of which we should see the other? Should our default orientation be primarily to think of Christ as divine and to explore his humanity in this light? Or should it be primarily to think of Christ as human and to explore his divinity in that light? We might be able to imagine a world in which we could explore both directions with equal vigor. After all, these beliefs do form webs of multiple reciprocities. But in reality, individual human beings and their theological traditions never do this. Individuals and traditions move into such issues with priorities, and the choice of these priorities is of critical importance.

Now, there can be little doubt that while our tradition affirms the full humanity of Christ, it stresses his divinity. A quick survey of the literature makes this quantitative disparity obvious. And in this respect our tradition follows the hermeneutical orientation of the New Testament as well. The New Testament and our tradition understood that Christ was a human being who came from God, but taking this as our basic orientation can too easily lead us to misconstrue what kind of human being Jesus was. As much as the New Testament reveals that Christ was truly a man, it is intent on making it clear that he is not an ordinary man. Instead, New Testament writers stressed Christ’s divinity because they were devoted to displaying Christ as a unique man, untainted by the Fall, well-acquainted with supernatural influence, holy in all his ways, even from his conception by the Holy Spirit. The traditional stress on Christ’s divinity displays wisdom in its basic choice of orientation.

And, in much the same way, this is why the tradition has stressed that the Bible is the Word of God. We have known that it is fair to say that the Bible is a human book that comes from God. But making this formulation our hermeneutical centerpiece can easily lead us to misconstrue what kind of human book the Bible is. The Bible is not an ordinary human book; it is a unique human book, untainted by the Fall, well-acquainted with supernatural influence, holy in all its ways, because it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Westminster’s stress on viewing the Bible as God’s Word represents wisdom that we should imitate today. It indicates that the primary way we should acknowledge or approach Scripture in our confessing community is to be preoccupied with and to affirm with fervency that the Bible is of divine origin, and then to explore how this belief should define what we mean by the humanity of Scripture. To sum up, what I’m saying is that Westminster focuses on the divine character of the Bible much more than it does on the human character of the Bible. And the wisdom is this: that your default drive, your main or primary orientation on any issue, will have tremendous effects on the conclusions you draw with respect to secondary orientations. Because we cannot pursue both

orientations with equal vigor, we need to choose carefully which of these two serves as the melody line and which is the harmony line. And I'm proposing to you that one of the most serious issues arising in our circles these days is which will be the melody line for us. Is the Bible fundamentally divine or is the Bible fundamentally human?

2. The Historical Reliability of Scripture

To illustrate the importance of this hermeneutical orientation, I want to point to two ways our choice of primary and secondary orientations with respect to the divine and human origins of Scripture affects the way we view two traditional dimensions of the doctrine of Scripture. First, I'd like the look at the issue of the historical reliability of Scripture.

It has been said more often than I can recall that one of the most wonderful things about Westminster is that it makes no comments about the historical reliability of Scripture. I wish that I could say that that the comment was from outside of our circle, but it is not. I can understand how someone who doubts this doctrine might come to this conclusion. After all, predispositions do often obscure subtleties and implications of texts like the Confession. It has also been argued that Westminster does not comment on historical reliability because the Westminster Divines were unaware of archaeological data that has come to light in the last 150 years. Well, it is true enough that they were not acquainted with modern archaeology. But we are ever so mistaken if we actually think for a moment that Westminster does not advocate for the historical reliability of Scripture in the face of challenges from unbelief. By the time Westminster was written, serious challenges had already been raised against the Bible's historical reliability. There is plenty of evidence on its pages to indicate that this was a concern at the Westminster assemblies.

In all events, the hermeneutical orientation of Westminster toward the divine origin of Scripture creates an expectation of Scripture, an expectation that is quite relevant to the issue at hand. Listen to 1.4:

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

Notice first that this passage deals with a concern for historical reliability. It focuses on the authority of Scripture to tell us what we are to "believe"; it does not simply refer to moral authority that we are to obey. Here we see a division of the content of Scripture familiar to those at Westminster. As the Shorter Catechism Question and Answer number 5 remarks, "The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of

man." There are two main or principle teachings of the Bible. First, what "ought to be believed," including all the factual claims that the Bible makes about God. As we will see, this includes historical events in the Scriptures because they are presented in connection with God and his ways. Second, those moral commands that are given to us, our duty in Scripture. Among those things that the Confession and catechisms catalogue as beliefs we are to hold concerning God, the Westminster Standards list the biblical records of what God has done in history. So, Westminster 1.4 addresses the authority of the historical claims of Scripture.

Notice how this paragraph reflects the hermeneutical orientation of the Confession toward divine authorship. Why are the facts of Scripture to be believed? In the first place, two options are denied. On the one hand 1.4 says, "not upon the testimony of any man," and on the other hand it says, not on the basis of any "Church." Now, the latter option, the testimony of any Church, refers most directly to the Roman Catholic claim that the authority of the Scriptures depends on authorization by the Church of Rome. This controversy, as you all know, is well attested in Reformed literature. But Westminster also addresses the option of "the testimony of any man," another cardinal view of historical Reformed theology. The authority of Scripture is not subject to but above the judgments of human beings, no matter who they may be, including philosophers, scientists, historians, biblical scholars or any other kind of human authority.

But in the second place, Westminster insists that the authority of Scripture is "wholly" dependent "upon God." Now, it is important to note something here. Westminster 1.4, which we continue to quote, is not a reference to the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit for the authority of Scripture. That issue is dealt with in 1.5. Instead, paragraph 4 displays the foundation of biblical authority by appealing to the divine origins of Scripture and to theology proper. On the one hand, the authority of Scripture depends "wholly on God" because he is "the author thereof." In other words, Westminster insists that we should believe in the authority of Scripture even in historical matters because it is of divine origin. But on the other hand, in a strikingly important parenthetical comment at this point, Westminster also makes it clear that the divine origin of Scripture is a vital consideration because of the doctrine of theology proper, or the character of God. The Scriptures are authoritative because they come from God "who is truth itself." Catch the logic here. God is truth itself. Therefore, the Scriptures which are authored by him are truth. To deny the historical, factual truthfulness of Scripture is to call into question the very character of God.

Now, as we all know, this declaration of the authority of Scripture in its factual claims has not been ignored in our tradition. In many respects, it was the reason Machen and other fundamentalist Presbyterians began their denominations. Moreover, in large measure the same issue sparked the division of the Southern Presbyterian church that gave rise to the PCA. In fact, the historical reliability of Scripture has been the signature conviction of our church's

history. It has been so central in our branch of the church that our ordination vows include an affirmation of biblical inerrancy. While not a confessional term, our tradition has viewed the concept of “inerrancy” merely as an explication of what is already included in the Confession in the term “infallible.” The term “inerrancy” is relatively novel, but the concept that the Bible is true in all of its factual claims simply reflects our Confession. Our belief in the historical or factual reliability of Scripture has been a mark of our ecclesiastical identity through all of these years.

Now, it goes without saying that our views on these matters are laughable in modern critical circles — utterly laughable. Those who are acquainted with biblical archaeology face many conflicts between scholarly interpretations of Scripture and scholarly historical opinions. Those acquainted with fields of paleontology, geology and biology cannot escape the fact that the Scriptures conflict with the majority of scientific opinions in leading academic communities. In fact, the idea that the Scriptures are entirely historically reliable is so far from plausible in critical circles that anyone who claims such a notion is simply dismissed as ignorant or dishonest.

Unfortunately, in recent years a very similar attitude has risen among our own scholars. Anyone who still believes that the Scriptures are historically reliable in detail is likewise caricatured as ignorant, or simply dishonest.

Now, to be fair, as some of our biblical scholars have moved in this direction they have rooted their arguments not so much in natural sciences. For the most part, biblical scholars don’t know enough about such matters to converse along those lines. Instead, the arguments that have come to the foreground are based on the humanity of Scripture. That is to say, they are based in large part on the assumption that God accommodated himself to the beliefs and literary styles of the ancient Near East to the point that the purposes of Scripture are largely indistinguishable from the purposes of other literature of those times and places. Parallels are drawn between the Scriptures and examples of ancient near-eastern historiography. Comparisons are made between the Bible and historically unreliable ancient mythological texts like *Enuma Elish*, *Gilgamesh*, or *The Epic of Atrahasis*, as well as royal propaganda like the Mesha Inscription (or Moabite Stone) and the Inscriptions of Sennacherib. Once significant literary parallels are established, the conclusion is drawn that the Scriptures were not intended to make as many historical claims as our forebears once thought they were.

Now this approach to biblical historiography touches all portions of Scripture, including the so-called historical books of the Old Testament and New Testament narratives, but much of the attention has been given to the primeval history, especially to the first chapters of Genesis. So, I want to focus my comments on that portion of the Bible.

I still recall a very dramatic moment in my education, at Union Seminary in Virginia, when a professor chided me in front of a class for holding that Genesis 1 was historically reliable. He derided me by saying this. “Genesis 1 tells us nothing about the way God made the world.” And I remember my response. “How can you say that? Even *Alice in Wonderland* tells us something about the way God made the world.” “Okay,” he admitted, “but all that Genesis 1 tells us is that God made everything. To go beyond that is ridiculous.”

Now, to tell you the truth, as I left the class that day, I felt like I had won a great victory. I had actually caused my professor to admit that Genesis 1 tells us that God made the world. I left class elated.

Unfortunately, in recent years I had that same conversation again with a respected scholar within our branch of the church. After hearing him claim, “Genesis 1 does not tell us anything about the way God made the world.” I responded, predictably, “Even *Alice in Wonderland* tells us something about this.” And the response I received was strikingly familiar. “Okay,” he admitted, “but all it tells us is that the God of Israel made everything. The mythic features of Genesis 1 make it ridiculous to go beyond that.” While I rejoiced the first time I had that conversation, frankly, I did not rejoice the second time. In my estimation, such conclusions are out of accord with our confessional heritage.

The Confession does not reflect this kind of historical minimalism when reading the first chapters of Genesis. It does not hesitate to treat a number of details presented in the primeval history as historically true. Notice how much detail 4.1 includes in its reflections on Genesis 1–2. We are told that God created humanity “in the space of six days” and the creation was “very good.” Even the chronology of the passage is reflected in 4.2, where we read that God created humanity “after God had made all other creatures,” that God created man “male and female,” that he created them “after his own image.” In 6.1 Adam and Eve are called “our first parents,” and we are told that they were “seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan” and ate “the forbidden fruit.” Westminster does not bother to argue for these beliefs. They are stated as true because the Scriptures state them.

The Confession’s statements of this kind stand in sharp contrast with those that relegate the opening chapters of Genesis to the status of ancient near-eastern mythology. Even when the disclaimer is added that myth in the Bible is true myth, I have not found these same scholars willing to state plainly that they believe that Adam and Eve were our first parents, or that they were actually tempted by a talking serpent, or that they actually ate forbidden fruit and were actually driven from a garden. These teachings are relegated to pre-scientific mythological status that has relatively little bearing on what we should think actually happened.

Now, we should all admit that since the days of Westminster the number

of challenges that have risen against the historical reliability of the Bible has increased dramatically. This is one of the reasons the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* was composed in the last century, in large part by representatives from our circles. *Chicago* states boldly that the Scriptures are historically reliable, but then qualifies the statement in a number of ways in the light of challenges that have been raised since the days of Westminster. But following the hermeneutical orientation of Westminster, it expresses this issue first in the connection between God as the author and the Scriptures as his word, and then secondarily qualifies that basic orientation. We all know these qualifications. The Scriptures contain hyperbole, round numbers, phenomenological descriptions of nature; they are highly selective; and so on. And more than this, the *Chicago Statement* also admits that there are times when we simply don't know how to reconcile what the Bible claims historically with other historical evidence. Yet, the affirmation of historical reliability is not denied or marginalized. This is not ignorance or dishonesty as some suggest these days. It is the result of a hermeneutical orientation that I believe the Scriptures themselves have. And more to the point of our purposes here, it is an orientation that appears in our confessional heritage.

I suppose that one of the most troubling issues for me in recent discussions about these matters is the fact that the challenges against historical reliability we face today are not remarkably different from those that we have known about for nearly half a century. There has been no tidal wave of archaeological data against the Scriptures that has come to light in the last twenty years that would compel any honest scholar to change his views on the Bible. There has been no barrage of data of which earlier scholars of our tradition were ignorant. Through the years, our denomination has been deeply influenced by scholars who knew well the data brought against the Bible, but still found the arguments based upon that data unconvincing. The evidence has not changed that much; it is the hermeneutical orientation of some of our scholars that has changed.

For instance, I recently reviewed a book in which one of our scholars wrote that Genesis 1 should not be treated as history because no human being witnessed the events of creation. Now, I think we would all agree that Genesis 1 is not ordinary historical writing in the sense that it is based on human eyewitness reports. But to deny that Genesis chapter 1 is history because there was no eyewitness is to deny the divine origin and supernatural character of the Bible. Genesis 1 is an eyewitness account, an account by God the all-seeing eyewitness. Our heritage has unabashedly approached historical reliability with this kind of hermeneutical commitment. The Bible is a supernatural book; it has all sorts of information that goes far beyond what human writers could have known through natural means. It is a supernaturally granted revelation; it is guarded against falsehoods; it is supernaturally authorized.

But the clear tendency that has grown in our circles is to approach this

issue with the opposite orientation, reducing or removing the supernatural dimension of Scripture. Then, on the basis of these kinds of assumptions, we qualify the ways in which biblical human texts can still be true. In the case of Genesis chapter 1, it is often called myth, but true myth in the sense that it points to the God of Israel as the true Creator. In the case of other historical portions of Scripture, those portions misrepresent historical events for any number of reasons, but their moral and theological points are nonetheless true. Once again, I want to urge that the heart of the issue is not new or overwhelming data; it is our hermeneutical orientation, an orientation that has broken with our heritage.

I once had a student who commented on the outlook in this way. He said this to me, “It’s like the Bible is an embarrassing uncle we have to introduce to our friends. So, we tell our friends all about the flaws that he has and all the weaknesses that he has before we introduce him to them. That way they are not bothered by what they see when they do finally meet him.” And I think my friend is right. The tendency of many in our circles these days is to focus attention on the historical problems resulting from the humanity of the Bible to the point that we are no longer bothered when the Scriptures do not appear historically reliable. I’ll say that again: *The tendency of many in our circles these days is to focus attention on the historical problems resulting from the humanity of the Bible to the point that we are no longer bothered when the Scriptures do not appear historically reliable.*

But I believe that the wisdom of our heritage teaches us that we should not diminish our expectations of Scripture to the point that historical problems no longer bother us. They should bother us. They should compel us to work very hard to deal with such issues and even challenge us to hold on to the historical veracity of Scripture when there is no resolution to historical difficulties available. After all, according to our tradition, the Scriptures came from God who is truth, and they are, therefore, truth. If we ever come to the point that the historical difficulties of the Bible don’t bother us anymore, then we have changed our orientation toward the Bible. They should bother us. After all, they came from God.

3. The Harmony of Scripture

Now we should turn to a second way in which recent hermeneutical posturing toward human origins has affected our doctrine of Scripture: the harmony of the Bible. I have in mind here the question of whether or not the Bible contradicts itself.

One of the firm conclusions of critical scholarship over the last 150 years is that the Bible represents a compilation of competing points of view. As the various voices of Scripture are allowed to speak, they present viewpoints that are incompatible as far as they are concerned. These contradictory views include

smaller matters like details of history, as well as larger issues like theological and political points of view. For the most part, this fragmentary approach to Scripture has been closely tied to critical reconstructions of Israel's history and questions of how the compositional history of Scripture fits within those historical reconstructions. At times, incompatible viewpoints are attributed to various literary strata within one book of the Bible so that one part of a book of the Bible conflicts with another part of the same book. For instance, it is widely accepted in critical circles that one stratum of Noah's flood presents its duration as 40 days and nights while another stratum of Noah's flood presents it as lasting 150 days and nights. At other times whole books are seen as competing with each other, for instance, the many differences between Samuel/Kings and Chronicles. This propensity toward finding disharmonies in Scripture has been so strong that often the slightest logical tensions between texts are magnified to the point that they are portrayed as diametrically opposed when critical scholars handle them.

Now, is there any wonder that this is true? After all, in this view the Bible reflects the outlooks of a multitude of human writers who composed their literature over nearly 1000 years. What could make more sense than to expect them to reflect contradictory and competing points of view? Frankly, if we center our attention on Scripture as a collection of human writings as critical scholars have done, this conclusion makes perfectly good sense.

I remember once having a professor who presented the prophetic denunciations of Israel's sacrifices as an example of competing views in the Bible — a conflict between the worship regulations requiring sacrifice and the prophets' rejection of sacrifices. Of course, he had no desire to see any harmony between the prophetic witness and the worship legislation of the Pentateuch because he had so reconstructed Israel's history that there was no reason to presume that everyone in Israel owed allegiance to Mosaic legislation. At one point I suggested that perhaps the conflict was not between the prophets and faithful interpretations of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, but between the prophets and hypocrisy among the Israelites that biblical worship legislation itself condemned. His answer was predictable. "That answer is too simple. It doesn't allow all the voices of Scripture to speak." (Remember that answer, please.)

Now, I have been saddened to find that very similar attitudes have taken root in our circles. Once again, I am not concerned with statements like those of B.B. Warfield who was one of the first in our tradition to acknowledge that the Scriptures contain multiple "concatenations" or "theologies." He firmly coupled this belief with the belief that there was extensive harmony among all of these theologies, and a harmony that could be seen in systematic theology. Instead, my concern is how much we hear these days in our own circles about the diversity of Scripture. And increasingly, our own scholars' characterization of attempts to harmonize the diversity of Scripture is the same as that of my professor: "That answer is too simple."

Now, my own concentration in biblical studies for a number of years has been the book of Chronicles. If there is one place in the Bible where the diversity of Scripture is evident, it is there. Working with the differences and detail between Samuel/Kings and Chronicles seriously challenges anyone who believes that the Scriptures are harmonious. So, I do not consider myself simplistic in my assessment of these matters. But at the same time, I am convinced that the unity of Scripture, the harmony and compatibility of its various parts, has been inappropriately obscured by a growing number of our biblical scholars.

Here again, I want to suggest that this tendency does not reflect the wisdom of Westminster. Rather, it has a different hermeneutical orientation. The position of Westminster is straightforward: the Bible is God's Word, and therefore it must be conceptually harmonious. We can see this orientation in a number of ways. In the first place, Westminster explains in 1.5 what distinguishes the Canon of Scripture from other writings as the Word of God.

Westminster 1.5 is best known in our circles for insisting this: that "our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof [of Scripture], is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts." Most of us remember from that paragraph in the confession that the testimony of the Spirit is so compelling that it is the source of "our full persuasion and assurance."

In scholarly discussions in our circles, appeals to the testimony of the Holy Spirit have become more frequent. This is an interesting feature of recent discussions. It is fascinating to me, however, to see how this appeal to the testimony of the Holy Spirit occurs in a context where the humanity of Scripture is emphasized. As the humanity of the Scriptures is stressed to the point that the harmony of Scripture comes into question, the testimony of the Spirit is brought in to counter the negative impact of what scholarly research says about Scripture. It serves as a personal *deus ex machina* (God as machine) — a sort of last-minute rescue of faith from the internal conflict we feel over Scripture. It is as if our study of Scripture has raised so many problems, including disharmony, that we must have an indisputable basis for believing that it is in any sense God's Word. And that indisputable basis is found in the testimony of the Holy Spirit, a religious intuition that is impervious to examination, impervious to disqualification — but also equally devoid of content and definition. Do I need to say that one again? An indisputable basis is found in the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Our religious intuition that is impervious to examination (nobody can argue with you if you have the Holy Ghost telling you this is true), impervious to disqualification (what open-minded person would say that God is not telling you this?), and also, however, equally devoid of content and definition. In other words, "I feel the Holy Spirit is telling me that this is the Word of God" — but the definition of what that means is an entirely different matter.

But in Westminster, this is not the process. In Westminster, the testimony of the Spirit is not a religious intuition that overcomes us in spite of what we know to be true of the Bible. Quite the contrary, Westminster views the testimony of the Spirit in conjunction with what we learn from the study of the Bible. As 1.5 puts it, "the inward work of the Holy Spirit [is a testimony] … by and with the Word in our hearts." The testimony of the Spirit is conjoined with the Word itself.

And this conjunction of the Spirit's testimony with what we know to be true of Scripture becomes even clearer in the way that Westminster 1.5 lists the qualities of Scripture. As it lists them, these qualities offer evidence of the divine origin and authority of the Bible. You know how it goes. Westminster 1.5 notes "the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole … the full discovery it makes of the ways of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God." It doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God, and then follows the word of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Notice that *the results of exploring Scripture* make it "abundantly evident" that the Bible is the Word of God. Our explorations *do not* make it necessary for the Spirit of God to rescue us from what we see there. Are you catching my drift here? This is extremely important.

Now, I wish we had time to touch on each of these evidences, but for our purposes here we should note that one thing Westminster expects us to discern in Scripture that makes the authority of Scripture "abundantly evident" is "the consent of all the parts." Put simply, this means that one way the Scriptures reveal that they are from God is that all the parts of Scripture consent with the other parts, they agree with each other, they are harmonious. Lack of harmony in the Bible would be evidence to the contrary.

Once again, we see the hermeneutical orientation of Westminster deeply influencing the logic of the doctrine. Here is the logic: the Bible is the Word of God, not among the human writings mentioned in 1.3. It is authoritative because it comes from God, "the author thereof," "who is truth itself" (1.4). And this divine authorship is abundantly evident in features we find as we study the Scriptures, one of which is "the consent of all the parts" of Scripture or the harmony of Scripture (1.5).

What we see here in Westminster is a principle that applies to every communication event. Under the influence of contemporary deconstruction, it has become almost commonsensical in our day (and all of us in this room would agree with this) that it is possible to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion successfully to practically any piece of literature we choose. If we have certain assumptions about the author of a text, capable readers can deconstruct their texts by dismantling them into contradictory, self-defeating claims. When we suspect that writers oppose us on some important issues, with enough effort we

can read their texts as riddled with internal conflict, and thus dis-empower their "will to power" over us. We can all do this with any text we want. We can do it today right now with the Koran, we can do it right now with the Bible if we believe certain things about the writer of the Bible. But contemporary hermeneutical discussions have also made us aware that at the same time, when we have alternate assumptions about writers, when we sympathize with them, when we are supportive of their views, we know how to spend our energy on finding ways to understand the coherence and harmony of their texts so that their text can have their intended impact (consider the way talk radio personalities and television pundits do this).

Now, one thing that can be said about the Westminster Assembly is this: they knew the Bible well. They were not naïve about the logical tensions and apparent disharmonies of Scripture. We can say the same thing about Jesus and his apostles and thousands of biblical scholars from patristic times to the period of Westminster. Although an argument can be made that some of these witnesses did not question the historical reliability of the Bible because they were unaware of many historical problems raised by modern research, we can say with confidence that they were well aware of the fact that the diversity of Scripture presents difficulties for harmonization.

What made it possible then for Westminster (or, for that matter, Jesus and his apostles and the host of faithful scholars of historical Christianity) to affirm the harmony of Scripture? To cast it in terms of contemporary post-structuralist hermeneutics, they all had certain predispositions toward the divine author of Scripture. They were sympathetic toward him. They were supportive of him. As Westminster put it, God is truth; it would be impossible for an entirely truthful God, trustworthy in every way, to contradict himself as he spoke in one place or another. In many respects, this is little more than the judgment of charity applied to God. We read his book with the expectation, even the firm conviction, that it will not present incompatible outlooks. And with this basis, this sympathetic reading, with this bias, we lead ourselves to see this issue in terms of theology proper, as a matter of our outlook on the character of God. It is much more responsible to say, "We don't know how these elements fit together, though we believe they do," than it is to say, "These elements of the Scripture given to us by God do not fit together." This is not dishonesty or naiveté as some scholars are prone to say these days. It is a matter of theological conviction about the character of God and our sympathetic reading of that God. When the historical orientation of holding divine authorship as the primary frame of reference and human authorship as secondary is preserved, the authority of Scripture is "abundantly evident" in "the consent of all parts of Scripture."

When this basic hermeneutical orientation is reversed, as has been done for some time now in our branch of the church, when human authorship takes first place and divine authorship takes second place, it is no wonder that the Bible is characterized as a problem for scholarly evangelicals. It is no wonder

that it is treated as a book of such diversity that it is disharmonious.

When we default to the humanity of Scripture as our primary reference point, we should not be surprised at all to find that passages like Proverbs 26:4-5 ("Do not answer the fool according to his folly … Answer the fool according to his folly") appear to be self-contradictory — even though there has been a long history of successfully handling these verses in other ways. It should not be surprising that the differences between the legal codes of Exodus and Deuteronomy are treated as somehow disharmonious, beyond harmonization. It should not shock us that the New Testament use of the Old Testament is characterized as incompatible with the original meaning of the Old Testament. This is said to be nothing more than recognizing the truly human character of such passages. Within this frame of reference, these and countless other portions of Scripture seem obviously contradictory.

But within the frame of reference afforded by millennia of Christian scholarship and reflected in Westminster, these differences are nothing more than opportunities for God's people to demonstrate their trust in the truthfulness and integrity of God the author of Scripture by putting forth the effort it takes to read these texts sympathetically with the goal of demonstrating their harmony to whatever degree our feeble scholarship allows us.

It surprises me sometimes how the term "harmonization" has become a word of disdain in our circles. Have you noticed that? In some sense, I can understand why. After all, at times the desire to harmonize has caused us to be satisfied with simplistic, inadequate outlooks on the Bible. And it has cut us off from many of the riches that Scripture offers. But rather than reject all attempts at harmonization, it is better to judge each attempt at harmonization on its own merits. This is what Westminster does.

Westminster's commitment to the consent of all the parts is not simplistic in principle. Westminster does not flatten the Bible as if it were written one afternoon by some man sitting in his easy chair. It acknowledges the diversity of Scripture. But at the same time, Westminster shows such high regard for divine authorship that it works hard to demonstrate the underlying harmony of this diversity.

If ever there were an example of theological tension in the Bible it would have to be the differences between the Old Testament and New Testament, or more specifically between the Mosaic legislation and New Testament ethics. Westminster acknowledges these differences. For instance, in 19.3-5 the Confession explains that the abiding significance of the moral law is different from that of the ceremonial and judicial laws. There is plenty of recognition of the diversity between the testaments in Westminster. But despite this diversity, Westminster strongly asserts that harmony exists even between the Old Testament and New Testament. You will recall how it closes its assessment of

the differences between the Old and New Testament in this way in 7.6: “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.” The covenant of grace is a theological construct that brings harmony to the most radical diversities we find in the Bible.

I don’t believe it is going too far to say that this commitment to harmonization reflects the mainstream of Christian theology from the earliest of times. Take for instance what the Council of Chalcedon said about the natures and person of Christ. You know how it goes:

> [Christ is] truly God and truly man … recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons.

Add to that the fuller expression of Westminster 8.2:

> The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon Himself man’s nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost; in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.

I must tell you that whenever I read these and similar formulations in Christology, I hear voices shouting inside of my head, and they are shouting questions at me. Are there any outlooks given in Scripture that seem more obviously mutually exclusive than the ones that are listed together here in these statements? That Jesus is one person with two natures, a divine nature that maintains all of the attributes of the Creator without exception, and a human nature that maintains all the limitations of sinless human creatures? Have you ever heard any harmonizations of different viewpoints in the Bible that go this far? Can you imagine an attempt to show the compatibility of different outlooks in the Bible that stretches credulity any thinner than these do? Those voices are screaming in my head every time I think of the hypostatic union. I more than suspect that many of us hear the same voices. Yet, this harmonization, this display of the consent of all parts of Scripture, is a pillar of Christian orthodoxy.

Why then has the church worked so hard to bring these teachings into harmony, even to the point of admitting that we cannot fathom how all these

things can be true? It is because orthodox Christianity, reflected in Westminster, has approached the Scriptures with an assumption: the assumption that they come from God and would not therefore contradict themselves. When we shift our hermeneutical priorities away from the priorities of Westminster to the point that we find the Scriptures to be disharmonious, we not only find ourselves out of accord with Westminster but also out of accord with basic Christian orthodoxy.

And more than this, stressing the human diversity of the Bible to this extent also robs our tradition of any possibility of having a system of doctrine that unites us. When we believe that the Scriptures are so diverse that they contradict each other, there is no longer any basis for the traditional notion of systematic theology, or for a meaningful acceptance of our ordination vow that the Westminster standards represent “the system of doctrine taught in Scripture.”

Now to counter this conclusion, some of our scholars have suggested that we shift our hopes for harmony in Scripture away from the traditional view of finding a coherent system of doctrines undergirding everything that is taught in Scripture. They have proposed that our commitment to Christ is the focal point that brings unity out of the diversity of Scripture.

This focus on Christological readings of the Bible as the unifying concern of the Bible has taken many forms. In our circle, it began in full force with the understanding of New Testament eschatology and how the New Testament saw Christ as the climax of all redemptive history. As you know, this outlook derived largely from the works of Geerhardus Vos and Hermann Ridderbos, two of the most influential authors of the last century in our branch of the church. Building on their work, others argued forcefully that all Christian preaching and thus all reading of the Old Testament must be filtered through this Christocentric eschatology of the New Testament. Fair enough. I don’t know how anyone could seriously doubt this basic orientation for Christian interpretations of the Bible.

But unfortunately, this stream of thought went further than the earlier advocates. This development was less concerned with establishing the harmony of the original meaning of Old Testament passages with New Testament Christological readings. New Testament Christological themes were discerned in the Old Testament at every turn whether or not they were tied to the original meaning of the Old Testament. In a word, Christological interpretation became increasingly *eisegetical* in our tradition.

Now as I see it, until the last decade or so, Christological eisegesis was largely based on the notion of divine authorship of Scripture. The assumption was that in his wisdom God designed the Old Testament to present all kinds of anticipations of Christ, even when these concepts were not in the view of human writers. Thus, Christian interpreters were thought to be right to find such Christological motifs in the Old Testament because God had ordained this feature of Scripture. Now frankly, I have never been convinced of this basic

orientation, but my concern is not to quibble over that here. My concern has much more to do with more recent developments in this stream of thought.

In more recent years, as the Scriptures have been increasingly approached as a human book, Christocentric reading of the Old Testament has not disappeared. Rather, it has found a new validation. Rather than validating Christological eisegetical readings of the Old Testament on the basis of divine authorship, more recent reflections on this approach have been squarely based on the humanity of the New Testament. Just as the Old Testament has been understood in terms of its ancient Near Eastern literary context, the New Testament is now read in terms of its cultural and literary setting. And as we might expect, just as in Old Testament studies, the tendency in New Testament studies has been to draw heavily from extra-biblical parallels to determine the intent of New Testament writers.

Now, the reality is that we don't know much about the ways Jewish writers interpreted the Scriptures in the first century. There was hardly one way it was done; methods of interpretation were about as numerous as the sects of Israel at the time. We can, however, reconstruct the practices of many of these competing sectarian groups this much. Many of them interpreted Scriptures in ways that hardly conform to what we might call in our circles grammatico-historical methods. Instead, many first-century Jewish sects approached the Bible in a very esoteric, charismatic, intuitive, eisegetical way. And this eisegesis was forcefully driven by a desire to show that their sectarian views were supported by Scripture. One only has to read a few pages of Pesher Hababbuk to have a sense of how far these sectarian readings went. And I think it is fair to say that many groups' readings (compelled by their convictions and sectarian viewpoints that they found support for in parts of Scripture) would be considered illegitimate in Westminster's "due use of ordinary means" sense (1.7). But these esoteric readings were held, nevertheless, by a number of groups in the first century.

Now, it isn't difficult to understand that when the humanity of the New Testament is emphasized, it is only natural to look for connections or parallels between the ways these sectarian voices handled the Bible and the ways the New Testament writers handled the Bible. On the basis of what I consider rather superficial connections, the argument is made that New Testament writers read Christ into the Old Testament much like their contemporaries read their own views into the Old Testament. After all, New Testament writers were compelled by the inescapable conviction that Christ was the Messiah and that their sectarian views were true. So, they went about interpreting the Bible in the same ways that their contemporaries did. The only significant difference was that they were followers of Jesus and not of some other leader. They understood the truth that God had been revealed in Jesus and in no other, and so they found him in the Bible.

So it is that within a frame of reference where doctrinal disharmony is

assumed for the Old Testament, it is said that we can now find harmony. But this is not a harmony that is founded on the "consent of all the parts" because God is the author of Scripture. And it is not a harmony that can be discerned through careful traditional exegetical work. On the contrary, it is a harmony that finds its center in intuitive, esoteric eisegesis driven by the sectarian conviction that Jesus is the Christ.

In some respects, I think that this sort of appeal to Christocentrism as the harmonizing point of reference is similar to recent appeals to the testimony of the Holy Spirit that I have already mentioned. Just as the testimony of the Holy Spirit is often appealed to as the source of our conviction that the Bible is God's Word despite the problems that the we find in the Bible, now our conviction that Jesus is Lord is the impervious religious conviction that makes it possible to read the Bible as a unity despite the problems of disharmony that appears on every page. In fact, we are encouraged to see Christ as the central integrating feature of Scripture *despite* — not *because of* — what we find through careful study of the Bible. Rather than being the fulfillment of the system of doctrine taught in antecedent portions of the bible, our commitment to Jesus is seen as the *Deus ex machina* for a Bible that is characteristically disharmonious.

Now of course, I don't know a Christian who would deny that in some sense our commitment to Christ is a unifying force in our reading of the Bible. But at the same time, when Christ is proposed as a substitute for a systemic unity, a conceptual unity that reaches to the details of every aspect of Scripture, one is left wondering how Christ can rescue the Bible. When the teaching of one stratum of Scripture cannot even in principle be harmonized with another, when one stage of revelation is not compatible with another, when so few items in Scripture are harmonious, then even our commitment to Jesus becomes nebulous — so nebulous that he is subject to diverse voices and can offer no substantial unity for the Bible.

Once again, I believe that all of this confusion is the opposite of what Westminster does. Westminster offers us a path of wisdom. The Scriptures are harmonious (and they even find their harmony in many ways in Christ) because they have come to us from God, the author thereof. Every detail of Scripture fits with every other detail, and this belief leads faithful readers to the conclusion that Christ is the fulfillment of every hope the people of God expressed in every book, in every Scripture, at every point. This is why Westminster warns against understanding the full sense of any Scripture as a polyphony. Rather, everything the Scriptures teach, when rightly understood, is unified and harmonious. As Westminster 1.9 puts it, the "full sense of any Scripture … is not manifold, but one."

To sum up what I have said, I believe that our confessing community would be wise to look to Westminster for guidance in contemporary hermeneutical discussions. I would by no means suggest that the Confession

gives us everything we need to know; nor does it supply us with a complete guide to biblical interpretation. Yet, its orientation toward the primacy of divine authorship, and the implications it draws for issues like historical reliability and the harmony of Scripture, give us a path of wisdom. If we vary from this path, we are sure to find ourselves varying from some of the most essential doctrines of our faith.