Commentary On WCF 1.4
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WCF 1.4
The authority of the holy 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.

- 1 John 5:9, *If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son.*

Excursus 2: How Does the WCF Treat Questions of Authority?
In WCF Chapter 1 (and Chapters 20, 23, 25, 30, and 31), the Westminster Divines attempt to give an account for how the authority of Holy Scripture relates to other authorities. To better understand these various relationships, let us consider the following questions:

1. What is authority?
2. What kinds of authorities are relevant to sacred doctrine?
3. How does sin and finitude impact our ability to believe an authority?
4. How should competing authorities be treated in relation to one another?

Q1. What is authority?
Authority is *the right to command assent*.

- This authority as it relates to sacred doctrine belongs to God supremely, and then derivatively to various angelic and human persons (prophets and apostles) who function as messengers of God.
- We say that an authority is most *credible* (believable) when they have knowledge of the truth, and the moral goodness that befits this knowledge (e.g. they are not a hypocrite).
    - God has invested certain offices with divine authority (Rom. 13:1) such as kings, magistrates, judges, fathers, parents, pastors, etc.
    - Sometimes an individual person destroys the credibility of their office through evil actions, and yet, God still upholds the power of the office in spite of the person's failings. This was the case with the Pharisees, and with Pontius Pilate.
        - Jesus says in Matthew 23:2-3, *The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.*
        - John 19:10-11 says, *Then saith Pilate unto him, Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee? Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.*
- When God sends messengers of truth (whether angelic or human), he often grants some supernatural miracle or sign to accompany the proclamation of truth so that the person's message is more easily believed as coming from God.
    - John 20:30-31 says, *And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might*

believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.
    - 2 Corinthians 12:12 says, *Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.*
    - Acts 5:12 says, *And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people*
- An authority can be *objectively* trustworthy (possessing both knowledge and moral goodness), and yet a person can refuse to give assent because of some sin or defect in their own intellect and/or will (*the subject*). This is the case for all who refuse to believe what God has supernaturally revealed.

Q2. What kinds of authorities are relevant to sacred doctrine?

- **God** is the supreme authority over all, including sacred doctrine. Therefore, whatever God has revealed demands our assent, simply because God is most trustworthy, most wise, and most good. None can surpass the credibility or authority of God.
- **Holy Scripture** is the written revelation of God, which is given to lead us to salvation. Although the prophets, apostles, and human authors of Scripture are in themselves more or less credible (e.g. compare Moses with Solomon, or David with Paul), it is on the basis of God speaking through them, as human instruments, that we believe their testimony. Put another way, it is the Divine Author, and not the human authors, who make Holy Scripture the supreme authority in sacred doctrine.
    - 2 Peter 1:18-21 says, *And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*
    - 2 Timothy 3:16 says, *All scripture is given by inspiration of God…*
    - 1 Thessalonians 2:13 says*, For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.*
- **The Holy Spirit,** who is God, and the Divine Author of Holy Scripture, was poured out on the church in a special way at Pentecost. Unlike Holy Scripture, which is a written Object, the Holy Spirit is said to indwell believers as in a Subject. The Holy Spirit enlightens our mind to understand the Scriptures, and also empowers us to bear witness and testify to the truth.
    - Jesus says in John 14:17, *Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.*
    - And in John 15:26-27, *But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.*

    - And in John 16:13, *Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.*
- **The Church,** empowered by the Holy Spirit, has authority to proclaim God's Word to the world. The intramural debates between Protestants, Roman Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox revolve around 1) the extent of church authority, 2) the nature of church authority, and 3) where church authority resides (e.g. in apostles, bishops, councils, etc.).
    - The Apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:15, *But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*.
- **Extra-Biblical Tradition,** whether oral or written, is an authority that functions similarly to familial and cultural customs. We receive these traditions from our predecessors in an almost unconscious way. Tradition (e.g. the Liturgy) is usually the context and environment in which we hear the Word of God, worship God, and learn about God.
    - The Protestant position subordinates all extra-biblical traditions beneath the Word of God. We regard tradition as genuinely authoritative, but fallible, and coming to us in a different mode than Holy Scripture.
    - Whereas Holy Scripture is unmediated instruction (directly from God), traditions of theological writing, worship, biblical commentary, and preaching are all (potentially) mediated forms of instruction.
- **Conscience** is *the act or trained ability of judging between right and wrong in matters of conduct* (see Romans 2:14-15, 1 Corinthians 8, 10).
    - When we speak of a person's "liberty of conscience" we are talking about the internal Subject of authority, namely a person's intellect and will (which has the natural light of reason, or reason illumined by faith), which either gives or withholds assent to some Object of authority (whether God, Holy Scripture, the Church, Tradition, etc.) and thus judges some action to be either commanded, forbidden, or permitted.
    - WCF 20.2 says, **"**God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also."
- Other authorities include the Civil Magistrate, Parents, Teachers and the like, but we pass over these for now since they are of less relevance to our present inquiry.

Q3. How does sin and finitude impact our ability to believe an authority?
First, note that this is a question strictly about the Subject of authority, namely the human person. Second, recall that *faith*, whether natural or supernatural, is a most necessary and reasonable medium for arriving at truth, and this for two reasons: 1) we are finite creatures, and 2) we are fallen creatures.

- The fact that we are finite creatures is good. Finitude is *not* a human defect. Finitude is a feature of our humanity, and God created us this way for a good reason (e.g. to teach us about how much we are dependent upon God).

    - In God's wisdom, He intends for us to arrive at the knowledge of natural things through natural faith (in our parents in the first instance, and other teachers as we get older). He also intends for us to arrive at the knowledge of supernatural things through supernatural belief (the virtue and light of faith).
    - Finitude makes learning through faith the most reasonable way to proceed. As Proverbs 1:5, 7 says, *A wise man will hear, and will increase learning…The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: But fools despise wisdom and instruction.*
    - The alternative path is incredulity and skepticism. Against this intellectual vice it says in Proverbs 3:5, *Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; And lean not unto thine own understanding.*
    - When a formerly trustworthy person or institution destroys its credibility through some scandal, lie, or moral failing, what usually follows is some crisis of authority. During the various reformations of the 16th-17th century, this crisis of authority (moral, civil, and religious) created an environment ripe for skepticism and the subsequent philosophies that elevated human reason above faith. We are still living with the consequences of this skepticism today.
- Our personal finitude should be a sufficient reason to acquire knowledge through faith (whether natural or supernatural), but our fallen condition is another reason to proceed according to this path. Now in order to even know that humanity has fallen from grace, we need God to reveal this to us.
    - Original Sin is a doctrine that we assent to by faith in the Word of God. It is not an empirically provable fact. Therefore, Christians have a double reason to proceed according to faith, first our finitude, and second because the Word of God tells us that our hearts are deceptive, wicked, and corrupt, apart from the grace of God.
    - Given what Holy Scripture teaches us about ourselves, Christians must acknowledge that however perfect the Authoritative Object is (e.g. God speaking in Holy Scripture), we are imperfect Subjects, and therefore in need of Divine Assistance to give us "ears to hear."
        - Jesus says in John 10:27, *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*
        - And Isaiah 50:4 says, *He awakens my ear to hear as the learned.*
- What should result from these reflections on our finite and fallen nature is a deeper level of humility. We should be humble enough to acknowledge our desperate need for God's Supernatural Revelation (the Object), and for God's Divine Assistance (the Medium: the light of faith), and for God to transform us as His subjects (granting us grace from which the light of faith proceeds).
- These two principles of finitude and fallenness cut both ways when it comes to choosing who to trust. Unless we believe in some infallible human office or institution (as the Roman Catholics regard the Pope when he speaks *ex cathedra*), no human being is excluded from being both finite and fallen, however saintly he may be. A great dose of realism can be had by accepting this!
    - First, on the part of the Subject (ourselves) we should recognize that it is virtuous and mature (not infantile) to rely upon credible human authorities, fallible as they may be, since we are fallible as well. When it comes to reading and interpreting

Holy Scripture, what Proverbs 24:6 says is true*, in a multitude of counsellors there is safety.* The broader community of saints (the Church) is a helpful check on our own individual perspective and conscience.

- Second, on the part of the Object (other human authorities) we should recognize that *because* all human authorities are fallible, therefore when they make an error, we should not be so surprised! Just as we do not expect any parent to perfectly raise a child, so also we should not expect pastors, teachers, and theologians to perfectly articulate every doctrine. The Apostle James gives caution to those who are teachers in the church by saying in James 3:1-2, *My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.*

- What kind of intellectual posture should the Christian then seek to cultivate? It should be that of a noble mind, ready to believe those teachers who are bearing good fruit (Matthew 7:20), and always searching the Scriptures so that faith may rest in the most stable Object, namely God.
  - Acts 17:11 says, *These* [in the synagogue of Berea] *were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.*
  - 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 says, *And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.*

Q4. How should competing authorities be treated in relation to one another?

We have already started to answer this question above, but here we will bring together some of the relevant sections of the WCF as it relates to *apparent* contradictions within Scripture itself.

- **Scripture Vs. Scripture**
  - In WCF 1.10 it says, "The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."
    - If God speaking in Holy Scripture is the supreme authority, then the supreme crisis of authority would be if God ever contradicted Himself. Obviously as Christians we believe that God never lies or contradicts Himself, therefore, we confess that all *apparent contradictions* can be resolved, even if we do not presently know *how.*
      - For example, it is of the virtue of faith to believe *that* there is One God existing in Three Persons, before seeking to understand exactly *how* that is the case. Recall that theology is an exercise in *faith seeking understanding.* Faith holds that the truth is true before we understand it.
  - In WCF 1.7 we read, "All things in scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."

        - This is the doctrine of *perspicuity* (God's Word is clear). Rightly understood, this doctrine is intended to undermine the Roman Catholic claim that an infallible church or pope is necessary to propose the Word of God so that it is rightly understood. The Protestant position, which animated William Tyndale, is that the Word of God is sufficiently clear in itself as to what regards salvation, and therefore the Word of God should be read and published far and wide so that man may come to this saving knowledge of Christ.
    - In WCF 1.9 we read, "The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture is the scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture, (which is not manifold, but one,) it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly."
        - While this principle is common sense, practicing this principle can be quite difficult. A skilled exegete must be able to discern the various modes of predication (e.g. using Aristotle's Ten Categories), have a strong handle on the whole system of theology, and must be able to determine what is proper versus improper (metaphorical) locution. To illustrate this point, consider how many different interpretations there are of the book of Revelation. Much depends upon determining what is metaphorical and what is not.
- In future lessons on the WCF, we'll consider how "the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture" (WCF 1.10) relates to Church authority, liberty of conscience, and the civil magistrate.