

## From Whence the Holy Scriptures Derive Their Dignity and Authority

*Text: Belgic Confession 5; I John 2:18-29*

The central question addressed in *Belgic Confession* article 5 is: how do we *know* that the 66 books of the Bible are the Word of God? This is not a matter of vague sentiment but of theological conviction. Reformed Christians have long recognized this as a critical issue, especially during the sixteenth-century Reformation, in opposition to the claims of the Roman Catholic Church. Rome asserts that the authority of the Bible rests on the church's endorsement: "we know the Bible is the Word of God *because the church says so.*" In contrast, the Reformed position holds that the Bible is authoritative *in itself*—its authority does not depend on the church's approval.

*Belgic Confession* article 5 presents three grounds for recognizing the Bible as God's Word: 1) the Bible carries the evidence of divine authorship in itself, 2) the Holy Spirit internally assures believers of its divine origin and 3) the church receives and approves it, not as the ground of its authority, but as a *testimony* to it. These are not three equal sources but three interrelated aspects: the first is the objective ground, the second the subjective ground, and the third the instrumental means.

### The Divine Evidence of Scripture

The Scriptures carry the evidence of their divine origin within themselves. They are *self-authenticating*. The confession states that they "carry the evidence in themselves [that they are from God]." This includes the repeated declaration, "Thus saith the Lord," the ethical power of Scripture to convict and transform, its historical accuracy, fulfilled prophecy and the remarkable doctrinal unity across many centuries and authors. No human mind could invent doctrines such as the Trinity, the incarnation, justification by faith or double predestination. These truths are too profound and holy to be of human origin.

Scripture itself teaches this. The *Westminster Confession* describes Scripture as being heavenly in matter, efficacious in doctrine, majestic in style, and fully revealing the only way of salvation (1.5). The *Belgic Confession* concludes article 5 by saying even the blind perceive its fulfillment: "For the very blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are fulfilling."

Prophecy underscores this self-authenticating nature. The Bible foretells Israel's history, the life and death of Christ (e.g., Isa. 53, Ps. 22, Job 19 and Ps. 110) and the New Testament age. Joel 2 predicts the Spirit's outpouring. Psalms 16 and 110 speak of Christ's resurrection and exaltation. Other prophecies predict Gentile inclusion, apostasy in the church, worldwide gospel proclamation (Matt. 24:14), wars, famines and moral decay. Even unbelievers who know the Bible only in passing can sense that these things are coming to pass, though they reject its message.

Even secular culture reflects this. Many who have never opened a Bible still talk about "the end of the world." Films often portray global disaster, wars and plagues, echoing themes found in Revelation and Matthew 24. Although misunderstood, this cultural anxiety suggests an instinctive awareness that history is heading toward a divinely appointed end. This is what article 5 means when it says even "the very blind" perceive the Bible's fulfillment.

### **The Witness of the Spirit and the Role of the Church**

The Holy Spirit is the internal and effectual ground of assurance. Article 5 says we believe the Bible "more especially because the Holy Ghost witnesseth in our hearts that they are from God." The same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures assures believers, saying in effect, "That is my Word." Scripture is the outward testimony; the Spirit is the inward witness.

This witness is *never apart from Scripture*. The Spirit does not whisper truth mystically. Rather, He confirms Scripture's authority through preaching, reading, and meditation. The Spirit and the Word always work together. He convinces us that Jesus is the Christ (I John 2:20-27), that we are saved (Rom. 8:16) and that the Bible is God's Word.

I John is especially clear on this. It speaks of "an anointing" from the Holy One (2:20, 27) and says, "It is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth" (5:6). The Spirit bears witness both to Christ and to the Word. When believers fall into sin and neglect the Word, their assurance diminishes – not because truth has changed, but because they have quenched the Spirit. Reformed theology rightly teaches that assurance comes *by and with* the Word, not apart from it.

The church also plays a necessary role as the instrumental means. Article 5 says we receive the books of the Bible "not so much because the church receives and approves them," though this recognition is not unimportant. The true church is

founded on the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20) and is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (I Tim. 3:15). It teaches and proclaims Scripture.

The church introduces people to the Bible. Augustine said he would not have believed the gospel except the church declared it. This is like the Samaritan woman who called her neighbours to see Christ—at first they believed because of her, then because they heard Him themselves (John 4). Romans 10 also supports this: “How shall they hear without a preacher?” The church sends preachers so that the Word is known. Remove the church from a region and the Bible soon disappears. This has happened in places like North Africa and the Middle East. The church lifts up the light of Scripture.

### **The Unified Testimony to Scripture’s Authority**

Scripture, the Spirit and the church work together. The Bible is God’s objective Word. The Spirit assures us of its truth. The church proclaims and teaches it. The believer belongs to a congregation, to a broader federation of churches and to the communion of saints through history.

Article 5 concludes that we receive “all these books and these only as holy and canonical.” We believe “without any doubt all things contained in them.” Scripture is holy because it is the Word of a holy God. It is inerrant because it shares in divine perfection. It is authoritative as the “regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.” These three terms capture Scripture’s role: it regulates, grounds, and confirms belief.

The *holiness* of Scripture means it is *unique*—not like other books; not even Christian ones. Creeds and confessions derive authority from it, but only Scripture is inspired and inerrant. Its holiness flows from its divine Author. Just as God is set apart, so is His Word.

The *Westminster Confession* echoes this: the church may move us to esteem Scripture, but assurance comes only from “the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts” (1.5).

Therefore, the Bible’s authority does not depend on human approval. It rests on its own divine character, the Spirit’s witness and the confirming voice of the church. These three together testify that the 66 books of Scripture are the Word of God—holy, inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient.

