
Good and Necessary Consequence in the Westminster Confession

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The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be obeyed. (WCF I:6)

The first chapter of the Westminster Confession has left the reformed church with a definitive statement of the perfection and completeness of the Holy Scriptures that is unrivaled in confessional literature. B.B. Warfield said of this chapter, "There is certainly in the whole mass of confessional literature no more nobly conceived or ably wrought-out statement of doctrine than the chapter 'Of the Holy Scripture,' which the Westminster Divines placed at the head of their confession and laid at the foundation of their system of doctrine."¹ Although a bold claim, it is hard to disagree with Warfield. The doctrine of Scripture propounded by the Westminster Confession has withstood the test of time as a remarkably sound and precise confessional statement of the biblical doctrine of the Holy Scriptures.

The comprehensiveness of Scripture is the initial emphasis of paragraph six ("The *whole* counsel of God concerning *all things* necessary..."). This emphasis leads into a statement of the principal scope of Scripture: the glory of God and the salvation, faith and life of man. The Confession does not limit the whole counsel of God on these exalted to "what is expressly set down in Scripture." An important distinction at this point identifies another mechanism by which one comprehends biblical truth. The Confession states that the whole counsel of God includes what "by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture." This essay will explore the background, formulation, and application of this important provision.

¹ B.B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing Co., 1972), 155.

At the time of the Westminster Assembly, the belief that one could deduce Scriptural verity and arrive at certain aspects of biblical truth that were not expressly stated was the subject of spirited debate. One major criticism of this method came from the Anglican church, as represented in the writings of Richard Hooker. Hooker was a staunch defender of the Established Church and fierce critic of the Puritans. His main purpose in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Hooker's major work first published in 1593, was to defend Episcopal polity and worship against the reforms which the Puritans proposed. He asserted that the Scriptures give little detail in all but the greatest matters of doctrine, and that much of the life and practice of the church is comprehended in general principles or left to man's judgment. In a chapter entitled "How Laws for the Polity of the Church may be Made by the Advice of Men," he wrote:

A number of things there are for which the Scripture hath not provided by any law, but left them unto the careful discretion of the church; we are to search how the church in these cases may be well directed to make that provision by laws which is most convenient and fit. And what is so in these cases, partly Scripture and partly reason must teach to discern.²

With this limited view of the sufficiency of Scripture, Hooker was wary of the idea that a distinct form of church government could be deduced from Scripture. He chided the Puritan writers for their deductive hermeneutics and laid down this challenge:

And we may boldly deny, that of all those things which at this day are with so great necessity urged upon this church under the name of reformed church-discipline, there is any one which their books hitherto have made manifest to be contained in Scripture. Let them if they can allege but one properly belonging to their cause, and not common to them and us, and shew the deduction thereof out of Scripture to be necessary.³

Besides Hooker and the Anglican Church, the Socinians also held the belief that Biblical authority must be limited to its literal statements, leaving no room for authoritative Scriptural deductions. The Anabaptists pointed to the lack of any explicit biblical statement on pedobaptism. Roman Catholicism, particularly within the context of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), also left the reformed church with a greater need to fortify and elucidate certain points of its theology and its methods for arriving at them.

It was within this atmosphere that that the assembly of divines met. It would be wrong to assume, however, that in light of its historical context the affirmation of "good and necessary consequence" was merely polemical in nature. The Assembly was committed to the principle that everything necessary for faith and life can be derived from the comprehensive teaching of Scripture and stated in a concise confession. The divines were unwilling to concede that God had simply left the church adrift and undirected in certain matters, or that human judgment was to make up the

² Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2 vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1958), 1:325.

³ *Ibid.*, 1:216.

balance of what was lacking in Scripture. The Westminster Confession's doctrine of Scripture therefore takes into account the *implications* of Scripture, comprehended by deduction, as being part of the whole counsel of God. The Confessions affirms that true doctrine is comprehended in the whole sense of Scripture and in the full scope of its implicated meaning. This important provision was given systematic expression by one of the Assembly's most notable members, George Gillespie.

Gillespie, a Scottish commissioner to the Assembly, articulated this point in chapter twenty of his work *Treatise of Miscellany Questions*. The title of the chapter contains the argument itself: "That necessary consequences from the written Word of God, do sufficiently and strongly prove the consequent or conclusion, if theoretical, to be a certain Divine truth which ought to be believed, and, if practical, to be a necessary duty which we are obliged unto, *jure divino*." In this treatise Gillespie directly responded to Hooker:

Although Hooker in his *Ecclesiastical Policy*, and other prelatial writings, did hold this difference between the Old and New Testament, that Christ and His apostles hath not descended into all particularities with us as Moses did with the Jews, yet, upon examination, it will be found that all the ordinances and holy things of the Christian church are no less determined and contained in the New Testament, than the ordinances of the Jewish church were determined in the Old, and that there were some necessary things left to be collected by necessary consequences from the law of Moses as well as now from the New Testament.⁴

Gillespie demonstrated how the deduction of good and necessary consequences is a valid method of interpretation that is used by Scripture itself, and how essential this method is in our understanding of divine truth. He demonstrated how deductions were employed in biblical argumentation to affirm great truths, such as the doctrine of the resurrection and the divinity of Christ. For example, Christ proved the resurrection to the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection, by citing Exodus 3:6, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Speaking to Moses long after the patriarchs were dead, this self-identification by God implies the continuing and future existence of the patriarchs because "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt. 22:32). He also showed how the divinity of Christ is proved by a necessary consequence in Hebrews 1:6. Based on such biblical examples, he cautiously formulated his thesis on the use of good and necessary consequences, which is worth reproducing at some length:

This assertion must neither be so far enlarged as to comprehend the erroneous reasonings and consequences from Scripture which this or that man, or this or that church, apprehend and believe to be strong and necessary consequences (I speak of what *is*, not of what is *thought to be* a necessary consequence): neither yet must it be so far contracted and straitened as the Arminians would have it, who admit of no proofs from Scripture, but either plain explicit texts, or such consequences as are

⁴ George Gillespie, *Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle, and Oliver & Boyd, 1844), 102.

nulli non obvice, as neither are, nor can be, controverted by any man who is *rationis compos*; by which principle, if embraced, we must renounce many necessary truths which the reformed churches hold against the Arians, Antitrinitarians, Socinians, Papists, because the consequences and arguments from Scripture brought to prove them are not admitted as good by the adversaries.

This also I must, in the second place, premise, that the meaning of the assertion is not that human reason, drawing a consequence from Scripture, can be the ground of our belief or conscience; for although the consequence or argumentation be drawn forth by men's reasons, yet the consequent itself, or conclusion, is not believed or embraced by the strength of reason, but because it is the truth and will of God...

Thirdly, let us observe with Gerhard, a distinction between corrupt reason and renewed or rectified reason; or between natural reason arguing in divine things from natural and carnal principles, sense, experience and the like, are reason captivated and subdued to the obedience of Christ, judging of divine things not by human, but by divine rules, and standing to scriptural principles, how opposite soever they may be to the wisdom of the flesh. It is the latter, not the former reason, which will be convinced and satisfied with the consequences and conclusions drawn from Scripture, in things which concern the glory of God, and matters spiritual or divine.⁵

Gillespie provides valuable insight into the Confession's doctrine of good and necessary consequence, which obviously bears his influence. First of all, the practice of deducing truth from the Scriptures is to be moderate and judicious; no deduction can be affirmed as doctrine if it is only possible or even probable. Only an objectively necessary deduction can be promulgated as biblical truth. Secondly, such necessary deductions are not always marked by unanimous agreement or universal acceptance. Many orthodox truths are held by good and necessary consequence yet not recognized by the Arians, Antitrinitarians, etc. Thirdly, Gillespie affirms that the locus of authority always remains with the Scriptures rather than the reason of man. Though he asserts confidence in the deductive ability of sanctified reason, his intention is to place assurance, not in man's reason, but in the Bible itself in its whole scope of intended meaning. Reason and deduction are simply the means by which the truth may be comprehended. Finally, Gillespie affirms that spiritual truths are spiritually discerned; only regenerate reason is able to deduce and embrace the good and necessary consequences of Scripture concerning spiritual and divine matters.

Gillespie makes another point that is worth notice, that God is entirely consistent with Himself and therefore proper deductions from His Word will be in harmony with His will. Whereas consequences can be drawn from a man's word that he did not intend, God perfectly understands and designs the consequences that will be drawn from His Word. Thus Gillespie contends, "if we say that necessary consequences from Scripture prove not a *jus divinum*, we say that which is inconsistent with the infinite wisdom of God."⁶

⁵ Ibid., 100, 101.

⁶ Ibid, 102-103.

Gillespie's argument is concluded by pointing out how often we depend upon the good and necessary consequences of Scripture:

Divers other great absurdities must follow if this truth be not admitted. How can it be proved that women may partake of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, unless we prove it by necessary consequence from Scripture? How can it be proved that this or that church is a true church, and the ministry thereof a true ministry, and the baptism ministered therein true baptism? Sure no express Scripture will prove it, but necessary consequence will. How shall this or that individual believer collect from Scripture, that to him, even to him, the covenant of grace and the promises thereof belong?⁷

Robert Baillie, another Scottish Commissioner, also typified the Assembly's doctrine of good and necessary consequence. His insistence on the authority of Scriptural deductions arose out of the controversy with the Anabaptists. He made the following remark on the Anabaptist's rejection of good and necessary consequences:

When in their debate against the baptism of infants they are straited with consequences from the circumcision of infants, and the promises of the Covenant made with Abraham, and his children; refusing with the Jesuit Veron in their reasonings all deductions though never so necessary and clear, requiring for everything they will admit, expresse and syllabical Scriptures.⁸

In his work *Jus Divinum* or *The Divine Right of Church Government*, Baillie used biblical deductions extensively and judiciously, for example, to prove that the office of ruling elder was Biblical.⁹

Samuel Rutherford, another notable member of the Scottish Commission, also explicated Scripture by necessary deductions, and sought to demonstrate the use of this method in Scripture itself. To cite but one example, in his work *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself*, he showed how Christ confirmed the resurrection by necessary consequence in Matthew 22:31, 32 and Luke 20:37, 38.¹⁰

Many agree that Gillespie and Baillie, and the Scottish Commissioners in general, bore a great influence on the Westminster documents, so much so that *The Cambridge Modern History* speculates, "It is uncertain whether they (the Westminster documents) owe their origin to the divines of the assembly or to the Scottish Commissioners."¹¹ No doubt, this "uncertainty" is a bit

7 Ibid., 103.

8 Robert Baillie, *Anabaptism, the True Fountain of Independency* (London: Samuel Gellibrand, 1646), 37.

9 Scott Thomas Murphy, "The Doctrine of Scripture in the Westminster Assembly" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1984), 155.

10 Ibid.

11 A.W. Ward, G.W. Prothro, and Stanley Leaths, eds., *The Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan Co., 1906), 363.

of an exaggeration, but the point remains that the Scottish Commission was very influential. Their influence is unmistakable in the Assembly's formulation of the principle of good and necessary consequence, to which we now turn.

The Assembly formulated this doctrine with obvious care and caution, for such a point lays open to misunderstanding and abuse. In paragraph 6 of chapter 1 of the Confession, it is first of all to be noticed that the good and necessary consequences of Scripture are held on equal footing with the express statements of Scripture; together they constitute the whole counsel of God. There is no varying level of authority that depends upon the method by which we comprehend a certain truth of Scripture; good and necessary deductions have the same authority as the "thou shalt" of the law. Because God is the Author of Scripture, He is also the author of the *implications* of Scripture. As B.B. Warfield put it, "It is the Reformed contention, reflected here by the Confession, that the sense of Scripture is Scripture, and that men are bound by its whole sense in all its implications."¹²

Most important are the two qualifications that biblical deductions must meet: *good* and *necessary*. The qualification "good" surely means that any biblical deduction must be in harmony with other Scripture. In paragraph 9, chapter 1, the Confession establishes the equitable principle that "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself." This, of course, would apply to scriptural deductions, and this would be the measure by which any deduction is deemed "good." It must be in agreement with the known corpus of truth that Scripture teaches, and it must be in harmony with "other places that speak more clearly."

The second qualification is that such deductions must be "necessary." They must be demonstrably certain and not reasonably deniable, or to borrow a familiar courtroom phrase, they must be "beyond a reasonable doubt." This qualification is a much needed safeguard against creative theological inferences based on meager biblical evidence. Biblical inferences that are merely possible or conceivable are not the stuff on which to build the doctrine and practice of the church. For a scriptural deduction to be necessary, it must occupy its own needful place within the structure of biblical truth and be in harmony with the other truths that it touches.

"Good" and "necessary" may also be seen as the terminological equivalents of the two standard criteria for sound, logical deductions. For any argument to be sound, it must meet two specific criteria, namely (1) the premises must be true and (2) the conclusion must follow necessarily from the premises (or "deductive validity"). True premises make an argument "good," while deductive validity makes its conclusion "necessary." Therefore, a "good and necessary consequence" requires verifiably true premises and deductive validity.

Paragraph 6 is careful to discriminate between the occasional need to deduce biblical truth and the view that Scripture is in need of supplementation, "whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." The occasional need to deduce biblical doctrine does in no way imply that Scripture is inadequate or unclear. It may be observed that traditions in which "good and necessary consequence" is not acknowledged or practiced as a method for arriving at biblical truth are also those most likely to have some form of extra-biblical authority. This was true at the time

¹² Warfield, 226.

of the Westminster Assembly in regard to the Roman and Anglican churches, who depended upon the authority of tradition, and the Sectarians, who often claimed new revelation. There are several other modern examples - to say no more - of this denial of good and necessary consequence with a corresponding dependence upon extra-biblical authority.

The Confession is just as careful on this point to avoid the impression that human reason is the ground of authority when it comes to doctrines or duties inferred from the Scriptures. “Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word.” The mind of man must be enlightened by the Spirit and subjected to the Scriptures if any saving truth is to be comprehended and embraced, whether that truth comes in the form of a plain statement or in the form of a good and necessary consequence. The Confession in no way implies that reason is its own authority, nor does it unduly exalt human reason as anything more than an instrument for understanding the Word of God under the good guidance of the Spirit. While a necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture by the use of reason, the ground of authority is still Scripture.

In Question 105 of the Larger Catechism, among the sins forbidden in the first commandment, the divines listed “bold and curious searching into His secrets,” with Deut. 29:29 as a proof text: “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.” The Assembly’s doctrine on this point is careful to avoid the exaltation of human reason, the indiscreet handling of Scripture, presumptuous theological creativity, and bold philosophical curiosity. Scriptural deductions must be good and necessary, not “bold and curious.”

In spite of these cautions, the Confession acknowledges the sanctified use of reason as an indispensable method of discovering Scriptural truth. The right use of reason and the ability to deduce were so important to the Westminster Divines that “skill in logick and philosophy” was among the ordination requirements that they listed in *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government*. On this point the Divines stood within the heritage of Augustine, who wrote, “The science of reasoning is of very great service in searching into and unraveling all sorts of questions that come up in Scripture....The validity of logical sequences is not a thing devised by men, but it is observed and noted by them that they may be able to learn and teach it; for it exists eternally in the reason of things, and has its origin with God.”¹³ In this same spirit, the Confession affirms that Scripture is meant to engage our minds and challenge us to reason, think, and deduce. The principle of good and necessary consequence reveals this quality of Scripture.

The Confession has been criticized on this point for not seeming to take into account the problem of human subjectivity in the process of deduction.¹⁴ While they placed an obvious degree of trust in sanctified reason, the Westminster Divines were not blind to the potential errors and abuses in the deduction of consequences. John Delivuk observes, “Like any method of biblical

¹³ Cited in Elihu Carranza, *Logic Workbook for Logic by Gordon H Clark* (Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1992), 97, 99.

¹⁴ Jack Bartlett Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 336, 346-347.

interpretation, the drawing of implications can be abused. One method used by the authors of the Confession to prevent this abuse was comparing their conclusions with other theologians.”¹⁵ For example, Cornelius Burges took the caution of comparing his use of biblical deductions concerning infant baptism with the work of other theologians, saying, “Nor have I been my own judge, or expounded them out of my head, but take such expositions as the most learned, judicious, reverend, and eminent Divines of this last age, as well as others of less note...”¹⁶ The Westminster Divines never portray the impression that deduction is a foolproof process, or that human reason is immune to error. As a safeguard against human error, they placed a high regard upon counsel and consensus in matters of doctrine, as is evident by their proceedings as an assembly. As Jack Rogers summarizes, “They did not...discount the opinions of theologians, either individually or in council. But they claimed that all opinions of men were valid only insofar as they agreed with Scripture.”¹⁷

It should be observed that the problems of fallibility and subjectivity are not unique to the process of deduction. There is necessarily an element of human judgment at both the level of interpreting the letter of the text and drawing good and necessary inferences. Both demand the exegete to use his mind under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the rest of Scripture. There is no way of raising doubts about deduction as a hermeneutical method without also raising doubts about the process of interpreting the more explicit statements of Scripture. Either way, the exegete must subject His mind to the guidance of the Spirit and the Word, but he must *use* his mind. We cannot escape the need to interpret the text, and deduction is one element of interpretation.

The Assembly placed other prudent limitations on the principle of good and necessary consequence. For instance, paragraph 6 asserts that “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence...” In other words, not *everything* may be deduced, and we need not force any deduction if it does not present itself. The light of nature, Christian prudence, and “the general rules of the Word” are enough to illumine our path in certain subsidiary matters. The method of deduction by good and necessary consequence does not hold the potential to answer every question that we may think to ask, nor should it be pressed beyond its capacity.

Earlier we saw how Richard Hooker argued for the more extensive use of human judgment in the worship and polity of the church. The WCF does not deny the need to use Christian prudence or sanctified judgment in certain circumstances of the life of the church. It simply emphasizes the need to follow the inferences of Scripture when such inferences may be properly made. In doing so we may find more authoritative direction than the light of nature or Christian prudence. We must not look for inferences where there are none, but we must not deny them when they may be rightly drawn.

¹⁵ John Allen Delivuk, *Biblical Authority in the Westminster Confession and its Twentieth Century Contextualization in the Reformed Presbyterian Testimony of 1980* (Th.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 1987), 151.

¹⁶ Cited in Delivuk, 151.

¹⁷ Rogers, 430.

We may discern another caveat in paragraph 7 of chapter 1, which reads:

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.

The point of this paragraph has clear application to the doctrine of good and necessary consequence. The great gospel truths of Scripture do not require the power of deduction in order to be understood. The saving truth of the gospel, in all of its power and simplicity, is accessible to all. The occasional need to employ logical deductions does not make the Bible too complicated for all but the most learned. The doctrine of good and necessary consequence is by no means a barrier to the purpose of Scripture, which includes man's salvation, faith, and life. Chapter 1 of the Confession affirms that all of God's people "have a right unto, and interest in the Scriptures" (paragraph 8). The occasional need to deduce biblical truths is not a complication that impedes the right and interest of God's people, who "through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures may have hope." The Bible may contain its intellectual challenges, but its gospel of Salvation in Christ is clear and radiant.

Furthermore, it is not the rules of logic that ultimately commend biblical truth to us. While biblical deduction must be sound, it is not the precise logical structure of the argument that commends it to us as believable. Paragraph 5 of chapter 1 lists the several things that may move us to "a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture." The sound logic of rightly deduced doctrine may be one of those things that garner esteem for the Scriptures, but it is not what persuades fallen men to embrace the truth. That is the work of the Holy Spirit alone. Paragraph 5 goes on to say, "...our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts." Sound logic, important as it is, is no substitute for saving grace. As the Reformed Presbyterian Testimony puts it, "The truthfulness of God, and not the reasonableness of any doctrine, is the ground of our faith."¹⁸ Sound biblical deductions are not believable because they are logical; they are believable because they are from God.

A good and necessary consequence drawn from Scripture may, therefore, lead us to an article of truth that must be accepted entirely on faith. A good and necessary consequence may, in the end, be counterintuitive to the reason and experience of man. A proper biblical deduction must have a sound logical structure, with true premises and deductive validity, but the conclusion might be beyond the bounds of human reasoning. The doctrine of the Trinity is a prime example; good biblical reasoning can lead us to a knowledge of this truth, but this truth itself must be embraced by faith. It is thus seen how reason can be rightly used without being the final criterion of judgment.

¹⁸ *The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America* (Pittsburgh; Crown and Covenant Publications, 2004), p. A-8.

The Westminster Divines were aware of this fact - that although biblical deductions must be sound, biblical truths are not judged by the reason of man. For example, Anthony Tuckney, who was by some accounts the most influential writer of the Shorter Catechism,¹⁹ said, "Logic rules do not circumscribe God, nor should our reason."²⁰

George Gillespie, who formulated the doctrine of good and necessary consequence with great care and conviction in his work *Treatise of Miscellany Questions*, also clearly expressed the believer's need to submit to biblical truth even when it is beyond the bounds of reason, using the Trinity as an example. In the same work he remarked:

Let reason be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. That which made the Antitrinitarians and Socinians fall away from the belief of the trinity of persons in the godhead, and the union of the two natures of God and man in the person of Christ, was, because their reason could not comprehend these articles, which is the ground of their opinion professed by themselves. When I speak of captivating reason, I do not mean implicit faith. The eyes of my understanding must be so far opened by the Holy Ghost, that I may know such an article is held forth in Scripture to be believed, and therefore I do believe that it is, though my reason cannot comprehend how it is.²¹

Finally, we may observe that, to the Westminster Divines, the use of good and necessary consequence as a method of interpretation does not lay the text open to a confusing array of various meanings. Paragraph 9 of chapter 1 affirms that the sense of any Scripture "is not manifold, but one." While the Confession is clearly refuting the allegorical method with this phrase, it also has application to the point at hand. Scriptural inferences do not open up an uncharted world of interpretive possibilities. Biblical inferences are not another layer of meaning in the text. We do not need to demand implications from every passage, or look for a deeper, latent meaning behind every biblical phrase. Good and necessary consequences will propound specific truths, not unveil mysterious layers of meaning in Scripture.

We can conclude that the Westminster Confession formulates its doctrine of good and necessary consequence within a context of many prudent cautions. The method of biblical deduction is always to be controlled and tested by the criteria "good and necessary," and it is always to be subject to the authority of the Word and the good guidance of its Author. Human reason is not exalted, nor is Scripture over-complicated, by the occasional need to deduce biblical truth; but where biblical truth may be rightly deduced, it must be followed as the Word of God. While some truths require sanctified deduction, Scripture itself remains clear, sufficient, and complete. In the historical context of the Assembly, the Roman and Anglican churches staked their doctrine on the authority of councils and ancient writers, while the Sectarians claimed to have new revelations

19 Samuel William Carruthers, *Three Centuries of the Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Fredericton, N.B.: Univ. of New Brunswick, 1957), 5.

20 Quoted in John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Richmond, V.A.: John Knox Press, 1973), 47.

21 *Miscellany Questions*, 59.

of the Spirit that went beyond the Scriptures. The Westminster Confession returned a balanced, biblical answer to both of these extreme positions.

It now remains to examine how the Westminster Assembly applied this principle in its proceedings. Concerning the question as to whether a divine warrant can be found for a specific rule of church government, the minutes of the Assembly reflect the resolution that necessary consequence can be used as a valid method to reach this conclusion, based upon Scripture's own use of this method. From session 640 on May 15, 1646:

Proofs that a necessary consequence is a sufficient argument of Christ's will.

Resolved upon the Q., First proof; 'Christ proves the resurrection in Matt xxii. 31, 32: "As touching the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living;" which is proof of the resurrection of the dead by a consequence only.'

This proof; 'Christ, John x., refutes the Jews reproaching Him with blaspheming for saying that He and the Father were one, by a consequence drawn from Scriptures,' calling princes gods.

Resolved upon the Q., Acts xiii. 34, 'And as concerning that He raised Him up from the dead, now no more to return to corruption, He said on this wise, I will give you the sure mercies of David,' which proves the resurrection of Christ by consequence only.

Resolved upon the Q., Heb. i. 6, 'And again, when He bringeth in the first Begotten into the world, He saith, And let all the angels of God worship Him,' where it is proved that Christ is the Son of God by a consequence.²²

In session 641 on May 18, 1646, it was ordered that the use of good and necessary consequence "may be cleared by sundry other instances, many more of the articles of faith being proved by Christ and His apostles out of the Old Testament only by consequence."²³

Based on Scripture's use of good and necessary consequences, the Assembly debated the question of whether biblical examples can be used to deduce abiding commandments.

Resolved upon the Q., 'Some examples show a *jus divinum* and the will and appointment of God; as in the Old Testament the building of altars to the Lord and offering sacrifices by the fathers from Adam to Abraham, which was done in faith and acceptance, for which there is no foregoing precept recorded in Scripture.'

²² Alexander Mitchell and John Struthers, eds., *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874), 231, 232.

²³ *Ibid.*, 232.

Resolved upon the Q., ‘The same may be said of the duty of the surviving brother’s marrying the wife of his brother deceased without issue, of which we have no evidence that it was the will and appointment of God before the law given by Moses, but the example of Judah’s sons, Gen. xxxviii.’

Resolved upon the Q., ‘In the New Testament we have like instances of the observation of the first day of the week for the Christian Sabbath.’²⁴

The foregoing examples resulted in the following conclusions:

Resolved upon the Q., ‘In all which examples, as we have cause to believe that the fathers at the first had a command from God of those things whereof we now find only their example for the ground of their posterity’s like practice for many generations, so likewise, though we believe that Christ, in the time that He conversed with His disciples before and after His resurrection, did instruct them in all things concerning the kingdom of God, yet nothing is left recorded to show His will and appointment of the things instanced in, but the example and the practice the Apostles and churches in their time.’

Resolved upon the Q., ‘Those examples, either of the Apostles, evangelists, or of the church planted and ordered by them, which are recorded in the New Testament, and are no where therein disallowed, and the particular reason whereof still abides, do show a *jus divinum*, and the will and appointment of Jesus Christ so as to remain.’²⁵

These conclusions were reached in the context of the Assembly’s debate over church polity, which was perhaps the greatest point of contention at Westminster. Several men were invited who believed in Episcopalian government, but only one, Daniel Featley, actually attended the Assembly. There was a contingent of independents, including Thomas Goodwin, Jeremiah Burroughs, and Philip Nye, but Presbyterians were in the clear majority. Among them it was debated whether Presbyterian polity was *jus humanum* or *jus divinum*, that is, by human right or divine right. Some thought that Presbyterianism was amenable to Scripture yet not clearly commanded, but the principled use of good and necessary consequences enabled the Assembly to finally conclude upon *jus divino* Presbyterianism in its document *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government*. This is but one example of how the scrupulous use of good and necessary consequences was part of the Assembly’s proceedings.

The deduction of good and necessary consequences from Scripture is much more than a historical curiosity of Westminster. It is a significant aspect of the faith and life of God’s people in all ages. The use of consistent deductions and logical thought in order to arrive at distinct statements of biblical truth is absolutely essential for an orderly and consistent approach to theology, preaching, and the application of Scripture to the various situations of the Christian life. B.B. Warfield went so far as to say that the denial of good and necessary consequence from Scripture would involve

²⁴ Ibid., 237, 238.

²⁵ Ibid., 238, 239.

the denial of all doctrine whatsoever, “since no single doctrine of whatever simplicity can be ascertained from Scripture except by the use of the process of the understanding.”²⁶ Not only simple doctrines, but *central* doctrines depend upon good and necessary consequences, such as the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is not the product of a single proof text; rather, it is an authoritative inference based on the premises of many passages, and, obviously, it is a central truth of the Christian faith. It is truly amazing how intertwined the principle of good and necessary consequence is with so many doctrines of the Christian faith. The Westminster Divines simply gave confessional acknowledgment to this principle, and did so with admirable care and caution.

It is also rather amazing how often the Bible itself, and Christ in particular, uses the method of good and necessary consequence. Several notable instances have already been cited from the writings of the Divines and the work of the Assembly, but many more examples exist, such as Matthew 12:9-14:

And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue: And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath days?” that they might accuse him. And he said unto them, “What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days.” Then saith he to the man, “Stretch forth thine hand.” And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him. (KJV)

In this passage, Christ uses a good and necessary consequence to teach that works of charity are lawful on the Sabbath. His argument takes the form of a categorical syllogism. Based on the first premise that it is lawful to do good to an animal on the Sabbath, and the second premise that men are more valuable than animals, He concludes that it is lawful to perform acts of charity toward men on the Sabbath. It is of interest to note that it was the Pharisees who denied the use of good and necessary consequences in this instance. They insisted on the “letter of the law” (or their own tradition) when it came to the question of how to observe the Sabbath, and they probably expected a proof text from Christ. Good and necessary biblical inferences, such as Christ presented, were not a part of their thinking. They were only incensed at Christ’s doctrine and His deductive method of presenting it.

Good and necessary consequences drawn from the Bible also continue to aid the church in its witness to the world in current times. The relevance of biblical truth to the shifting sands of modern culture is often discerned through the deduction of good and necessary consequences. For instance, what is the church to say about abortion? There is no passage of Scripture that says, in so many words, “abortion is wrong.” It simply was not a pressing issue in the days of Moses or Paul. But by the use of good and necessary consequence we can arrive at the will of God on this matter:

²⁶ Warfield, 227.

1st Premise: It is a sin to murder another human being (e.g. Exodus 20:13).

2nd Premise: Children in the womb are human beings (e.g. Psalm 139:13-16).

Conclusion: It is a sin to murder children in the womb.

In this and other ways, the deduction of good and necessary consequences from Scripture remains an important aspect of the life, faith, and witness of the church.

This principle, as articulated in the Westminster Confession, is built upon a desire to be true to the whole counsel of God as it applies in every age, whether plainly expressed in Scripture or rightly deduced from Scripture. This must still be the priority of the church today.

In conclusion, George Gillespie pointed out a very practical implication of this doctrine when he asked, “How,” without the use of good and necessary consequence, “shall this or that individual believer collect from Scripture, that to him, even to him, the covenant of grace and the promises thereof belong?”²⁷ By good and necessary consequence, the gospel promises of Christ which are given in general to all of His people may be appropriated in personal terms, and the individual believer may find particular comfort and assurance. “Good and necessary consequence” is more than a little noticed phrase in a centuries old confession. It is a principle of great importance to the faith and life of each believer. By it you may know that the promises of the gospel belong to *you*.

²⁷ Gillespie, 103.