

# Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship, Chapter 1

## What Is *Sola Scriptura*?

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Before we consider the relationship between *sola scriptura* and the regulative principle, we need first to define *sola scriptura*. After a brief definition of this doctrine is given, we will then turn our attention to the Protestant confessional statements.

Briefly stated, the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* teaches that the Bible (the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments) is the divinely inspired word of God and therefore infallible and absolutely authoritative in all matters of faith and life. Because God's inscripturated word contains all the extant supernatural revelation of God, and because all forms of direct revelation have ceased (with the death of the apostles and the close of the canon), the Bible alone is the church's sole authority. Because Scripture is perspicuous (i.e., all the necessary teaching for salvation, faith and life are easily understood by the common people), there is no need for any additional sources of authority to infallibly interpret the Bible for the church. The church (whether popes, cardinals, bishops, church fathers, church councils, synods or congregations) does not have authority over the Bible, but the self-authenticating Scriptures have absolute authority over the church and all men. Because of what the Bible is (as noted above), the church's job is purely ministerial and declarative. All men are forbidden to add or detract from the sacred Scriptures, whether by human traditions, or so-called new revelations of the Spirit, or by the decrees of councils or synods. The Bible is sufficient and perfect and does not need any human additions. Further, only that which is taught in Scripture can be used to bind the consciences of men.

### 1. The Reformed Confessional Understanding of *Sola Scriptura*

The Reformed confessions are in total agreement regarding *sola scriptura* or the regulative principle of Scripture.

#### **First Helvetic Confession (1536)**

*Art. 1. Scripture.* The Canonical Scripture, being the Word of God, and delivered by the Holy Ghost, and published to the world by the prophets and apostles, being of all others the most perfect and ancient philosophy, doth perfectly contain all piety and good ordering of life.<sup>1</sup>

#### **French Confession (1559)**

*Art. 5.* We believe that the word, contained in these books, came from one God; of whom alone, and not of men, the authority thereof dependeth. And seeing this is the sum of all truth, containing whatsoever is required for the worship of God and our salvation, we hold it not lawful for men, no, not for the angels themselves, to add or detract any thing to or from that word, or to alter any whit at all in the same.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from the Latin by Peter Hall, *The Harmony of Protestant Confessions* (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992 [1842]), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

## **Belgic Confession (1561)**

### *Article 7. The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures to be the Only Rule of Faith*

We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures: *nay, though it were an angel from heaven*, as the apostle Paul saith. For since it is forbidden *to add unto or take away any thing from the Word of God*, it doth thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects. Neither do we consider of equal value any writing of men, however holy these men may have been, with those divine Scriptures; nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, for the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule which the apostles have taught us, saying, *Try the spirits whether they are of God*. Likewise, *If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house*.<sup>3</sup>

## **Second Helvetic Confession (1566)**

### *I. Of the Holy Scripture Being the True Word of God...*

2. And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has all things fully expounded which belong to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded of God that nothing be either put to or taken from the same (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19).

3. We judge, therefore, that from these Scriptures are to be taken true wisdom and godliness, the reformation and government of churches; as also instruction in all duties of piety; and, to be short, the confirmation of doctrines, and the confutation of all errors, with all exhortations; according to that word of the apostle, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof,” etc. (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Again, “These things write I unto thee,” says the apostle to Timothy, “...that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God,” etc. (1 Tim. 3:14-15).<sup>4</sup>

### *II. Of Interpreting the Holy Scriptures; and of Fathers, Councils, and Traditions....*

4. ...Therefore, in controversies of religion or matters of faith, we can not admit any other judge than God Himself, pronouncing by the Holy Scriptures what is true, what is false, what is to be followed, or what [is] to be avoided. So we do not rest but in the judgment of spiritual men, drawn from the Word of God. Certainly Jeremiah and other prophets did vehemently condemn the assemblies of priests gathered against the law of God; and diligently forewarned us that we

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<sup>3</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 14, 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 10, 12.

should not hear the fathers, or tread in their path who, walking in their own inventions, swerved from the law of God.

5. We do likewise reject human traditions, which, although they be set out with goodly titles, as though they were divine and apostolic, delivered to the Church by the lively voice of the apostles, and, as it were, by the hands of apostolical men, by means of bishops succeeding in their room, yet, being compared with the Scriptures, disagree with them; and that by their disagreement betray themselves in no wise to be apostolical. For as the apostles did not disagree among themselves in doctrine, so the apostles' scholars did not set forth things contrary to the apostles. Nay, it were blasphemous to avouch that the apostles, by lively voice, delivered things contrary to their writings. Paul affirms expressly that he taught the same things in all churches (1 Cor. 4:17). And, again, "We," says he, "write none other things unto you, than what ye read or acknowledge" (2 Cor. 1:13). Also, in another place, he witnesses that he and his disciples—to wit, apostolic men—walked in the same way, and jointly by the same Spirit did all things (2 Cor. 12:18). The Jews also, in time past, had their traditions of elders; but these traditions were severely refuted by the Lord, showing that the keeping of them hinders God's law, and that God is in vain worshiped of such (Matt. 15:8-9; Mark 7:6-7).<sup>5</sup>

## **The Westminster Standards (1646-1648)**

### **Shorter Catechism**

Q. 2. *What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?*

A. The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.<sup>6</sup>

### **Larger Catechism**

Q. 3. *What is the word of God?*

A. The holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.

### **Confession of Faith**

1.2. Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these: ... All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.

1.6. 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 observed.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 14, 16.

<sup>6</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, Scotland: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1976), 287. Note: all quotations in this book from the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms are taken from this edition.

## 2. Clarifications

According to the Reformed confessional statements the Bible is a perfect, complete and sufficient rule of faith and life. Now that the canon is closed and direct revelation has ceased, the inspired Scriptures are the *only* rule of doctrine and practice. Although the Bible is the only rule that God has given us to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him, there are a number of issues that need to be clarified before we proceed.

First, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is not a denial of natural revelation. The Bible itself teaches that there are things that man can learn about God and himself from nature (cf. Ps. 19; Rom. 1:20ff.). We should note, however, that: (1) Natural revelation was never intended to be used independently of direct revelation. Before the fall God spoke directly to Adam regarding the tree of good and evil. (2) When mankind fell in Adam, both the earth and the human race were affected by sin. Sin and the curse have rendered natural revelation unreliable as a source for ethics. (3) Scripture teaches that although natural revelation is enough to render the human race guilty and without excuse (Rom. 1:18), it is not sufficient to teach man about salvation, Christ and many other crucial doctrines. (4) Further, any doctrines or ethics that could be determined from natural revelation could not contradict and would have to be judged by the perspicuous and sufficient Holy Scriptures.

Second, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is not a denial of the progressive nature and diverse means of divine revelation before the close of the canon. A fundamental teaching of the regulative principle of Scripture is that man is not to add or detract from God's word (Dt. 4:2). Yet prior to the completion of Scripture this command did not preclude God himself from adding his own thoughts to that which the people of God already had. It did, however forbid anyone to add or detract from the divine revelation which they did have, whether by false prophecy, divination, human tradition and the neglect of God's ordinances. Further, as Christians we look back to a completed and *written* revelation. (In times past men received visions, dreams and verbal communication from God, and not every revelation was committed to writing.) Note also that God could have preserved divine revelation by a supernatural preservation *apart* from committing revelation to written form if he had wanted to. However, in God's good pleasure and infinite wisdom he has committed everything that the church and the world needs to a written revelation. Since natural revelation is insufficient, direct revelation to the church has ceased, and God has committed his will to us "wholly unto writing," the Scriptures are our *sole* standard for faith and life.

Third, the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which says that "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," is not a denial that there were many revelations and historical events that did not make it into the canon. The completed Scripture that God has given to the church is exactly what he wanted us to have. He could have given his people one hundred volumes containing more case laws, more detailed histories of the patriarchs, Moses, Israel, Jesus Christ and the acts of the apostolic church. But Jehovah gave us the 66 books alone, and this completed canon is perfect and in every way sufficient to answer its design. God has many secret things that belong to himself and his divine perfections which are infinite and could never fully and adequately be revealed to us even if a million inspired volumes existed. But in his mercy everything that we do need to know, love and serve him has been given to us in the Scriptures.

