

# Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship, Chapter 2

## Aspects of *Sola Scriptura*

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### 1. The Authority of Scripture

The regulative principle of Scripture rests upon the fact that the Bible is unique. The Bible *alone* is God's word. The Westminster Confession says, "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" (1.4). Scripture is inspired by God. Therefore, it is truth and it carries the authority of God himself. It alone among books carries an absolute authority.

There is only one God—the ontological trinity who is transcendent, who has created all things and who gives meaning to all factuality. Likewise, presently there is only one direct verbal or written source of divine revelation. There is only one book which tells us the mind and will of God. Because the Scripture is breathed out by God himself, it is self-authenticating and absolute. Its authority does not depend on the church, or empirical evidences, or human philosophy. The church and all men are required to submit to the authority of Scripture without any quibbling or reservations, for it is the voice of the Almighty himself.

Because Scripture is God's Word, it is the final, definitive authority in all matters of faith and life. The Bible is the only absolute, objective standard by which ethics, doctrine, church government and worship are to be judged. The Westminster Confession 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" (1.10). Men who are sinful and fallible can and do receive a delegated authority from God. However, only God, who is the absolute sovereign and creator of all things, has the right to bind men to faith and duty.

### 2. The Sufficiency and Perfection of Scripture

An understanding of the sufficiency, perfection or completeness of Scripture (which is a crucial aspect of the Reformed understanding of *sola scriptura*) will lead us to a deeper understanding of the inseparable connection that exists between the regulative principle of Scripture and the regulative principle of worship. By the perfection of Scripture we mean that the Bible is fully sufficient unto the end for which it was designed by God. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Robert Shaw writes, "The Scripture is represented as *perfect*, fitted to answer every necessary end, Ps. xix. 8, 9; it is sufficient to make 'the man of God perfect,' and able to make private Christians 'wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus.'—2 Tim. iii. 15-17. So complete is the Scripture, that its Author has peremptorily prohibited either to add to,

or to diminish ought from it.—Deut. iv. 2; Rev. xxii. 18, 19.”<sup>1</sup> A. A. Hodge writes, “as a matter of fact, the Scriptures do teach a perfect system of doctrine, and all the principles which are necessary for the practical regulation of the lives of individuals, communities, and churches. The more diligent men have been in the study of the Bible, and the more assiduous they have been in carrying out its instructions into practice, the less has it been possible for them to believe that it is incomplete in any element of a perfect rule of all that which man is to believe concerning God, and of all that duty which God requires of man.”<sup>2</sup>

When we discuss the Scripture as the inspired final revelation of God that is sufficient and complete for salvation, service to God, faith and practice, we do not mean that there are no truths that can be ascertained outside of Scripture. We noted earlier that certain things about God and ourselves are learned from natural revelation. Further, one does not need the Bible to practice elementary logic, simple mathematics and basic surface observations. The achievements of unbelieving scientists, engineers, artists, architects, medical doctors and others in the world are proof of this assertion. However, even in these so-called “secular” areas of life unbelievers must conduct their affairs in accordance with biblical presuppositions in order to get anything done. In other words, the Bible not only tells us about God, ourselves, redemption and ethics, it also is the foundation of all meaning. Apart from divine revelation man cannot really understand or account for anything. Van Til writes, “Thus the Bible, as the infallibly inspired revelation of God to sinful man, stands before us as that light in terms of which all the facts of the created universe must be interpreted. All of finite existence, natural and redemptive, functions in relation to one all-inclusive plan that is in the mind of God. Whatever insight man is to have into this pattern of the activity of God he must attain by looking at all his objects of research in the light of Scripture. If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture.”<sup>3</sup> Further, there are no areas of ethical neutrality in the universe. Even in areas in which the Bible does not speak directly, such as structural engineering and rocket science, it does speak indirectly. All of life is to be lived for God’s glory, and even the most mundane activities are to be conducted according to general principles of God’s word.

By the “perfection and sufficiency” of Scripture the Reformed confessions mean that the Bible is such a perfect and complete guide to man regarding everything that God requires us to believe (salvation, doctrine, statutes, etc.) and everything that God requires us to do (ethics, sanctification, worship ordinances, church government, etc.) that it does not need any supplementation from man. The Reformed confessions emphasize that the Bible is not one rule among many or simply the best or principal rule. It is the *only* rule of faith and practice. The First Helvetic Confession says: “The Canonical Scripture...*doth alone perfectly contain* all piety and good ordering of life” (Art. 1).<sup>4</sup> The Belgic Confession says: “We believe that those Holy Scriptures *fully contain* the will of God...*the whole manner of* worship which God requires of us is written in them...” (Art. 7).<sup>5</sup> The Second Helvetic Confession says: “And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has *all things fully expounded* which belong to a saving

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Shaw, *Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, n.d. [1845]), 16.

<sup>2</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 124.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 124. Van Til quotes John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.VI.2.

<sup>4</sup> *Harmony of Protestant Confessions*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*, 14.

faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God...” (1:2). The Westminster Shorter Catechism says: “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” (A. to Q. 2). The Larger Catechism says: “The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the word of God, *the only rule* of faith and obedience” (A. to Q. 3). The Confession of Faith says: “The whole counsel 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...” (1.6, emphasis added).

Positively speaking, the Bible is the *only* rule for faith and obedience. Negatively speaking, men are expressly forbidden to add their own ideas, doctrine and/or precepts to the Scripture in any way. The French Confession says: “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, for the angels themselves, to add or detract anything to or from that word, or to alter any whit at all in the same” (Art. 5).<sup>6</sup> The Belgic Confession says: “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...” (Art. 7).<sup>7</sup> The Second Helvetic Confession says: “in this respect it is expressly commanded of God that nothing be either put to or taken away from the same [the Holy Scriptures] (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19).”<sup>8</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith says: “...unto which [Scripture] nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men” (1.6). The fact that the Bible is sufficient, perfect and complete renders all attempts at supplementing its teachings regarding faith and ethics with ideas and rules that originate in man’s mind to be unbiblical and foolish. Against spiritualistic enthusiasts, charismatics, diviners and all false prophets the Westminster Confession of Faith states that no “new revelations of the Spirit” are to be added to God’s word. Against the papists and all who intrude human traditions into the precepts, ordinances, worship or government of the church, the Reformed confessions condemn adding “the traditions of men” to the word of God. The doctrine of the perfection and sufficiency of Scripture protects believers from the tyranny of human requirements. No one (whether a bishop, church father, synod or council) is permitted to bind men’s consciences with any doctrine or requirement. Everything must be based on Scripture, either by direct command or by good and necessary consequence. Thus the Westminster Confession of Faith says, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to His Word; or beside it, in matters of faith and worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience...” (20.2). Regarding good works the Confession says, “Good works are only such as God hath commanded in His holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are

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<sup>6</sup> *Harmony of Protestant Confessions*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*, 14, 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretence of good intention” (16.1). Concerning worship the Confession says, “But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures” (21.1).

### 3. The Completeness and Finality of Scripture

When the Reformed confessions assert the perfection and sufficiency of Scripture, and when the Westminster Confession speaks against “new revelations of the Spirit,” they are teaching the completeness and finality of Scripture. By Scripture we mean the completed canon (the 66 books of the Old and New Testament), the inscripturated word of God. At this point in salvation history (*after* the completion of Christ’s redemptive work, *after* the person and work of Christ has been explained by the New Testament prophets and apostles and the government, worship and doctrine of the new covenant church has been fully set forth by the Holy Spirit in Scripture) the revelatory process has ceased. Scripture could not have been completed until after Jesus accomplished his work on earth. Everything in Scripture is related in some manner to the person and work of Christ. Jesus is described as the climax and finality of God speaking to man (Heb. 1:1-2).

Our Lord told his disciples that it was to their advantage that he go away, for after his ascension he would send the Holy Spirit who would guide them into all truth (Jn. 16:7, 13-15). The Spirit-inspired apostles and New Testament prophets gave us the foundation (the N.T. canon) upon which the new covenant churches build (Eph. 2:20-21). Paul said that when the perfect comes (i.e., the completed N.T. revelation), prophecy and other modes of revelation would cease (1 Cor. 13:8-12). It is a fact of history that divine revelation did cease when the last apostle died. Throughout history those who have claimed to have direct revelations from God (e.g., Montanists, Zickau prophets, Irvingites, modern charismatics, etc.) have always been false prophets. Christ and the apostles predicted the rise of false prophets and warned us not to follow their counterfeit revelations (cf. Mt. 7:15-23; 24:11; 2 Pet. 2:1 ff.; 2 Th. 2:9-11; etc.). The fact that revelation has ceased and that Scripture has been designed by God as fully sufficient to meet all our needs (2 Tim. 3:16-17) means that if we want to know God’s mind and will, our only source for this knowledge is the Bible. John Murray writes,

Scripture occupies for us an exclusive place and performs an exclusive function as the only extant mode of revelation. It is granted by those with whom we are particularly concerned in this address that Scripture does not continue to be written, that it is a closed canon. Once this is admitted, then we must entertain what our opponents are not willing to grant, namely, that conception of Scripture taught and pre-supposed by our Lord and his apostles, and insist that it is this conception that must be applied to the whole canon of Scripture. Since we no longer have prophets, since we do not have our Lord with us as he was with the disciples, and since we do not have new organs of revelation as in apostolic times, Scripture in its total extent, according to the conception entertained by our Lord and his apostles, is the only revelation of the mind and will of God available to us. This is what the finality of Scripture means for us; it is the only extant revelatory Word of God.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Murray, “The Finality and Sufficiency of Scripture” in *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:19. Cults (e.g., Swedenborgianism, Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witness, the Unification Church, etc.) are notorious for setting up a new (false) revelation that is then used as an absolute and superior standard to judge and

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reinterpret the Bible. Infallibility, absolute authority and sufficiency are shifted from the Bible to the latest revelation. This gives the cult leader or leaders total power over their deluded followers. The non-cessationist charismatic movement believes in continuing direct revelation from God. However, tongues, the word of knowledge and prophecy are *inconsistently* given a secondary status to the Bible. There are no attempts (by charismatics) to add new revelations to the canon of Scripture. Some intellectual charismatics have even developed the idea that prophecy now is different than Old Testament prophecy—that inaccuracies and mistakes are acceptable in new covenant post-apostolic prophecy. All such teaching is an implicit acceptance of the cessation position and *sola scriptura*. When Pentecostal preachers have insisted that their “prophecies” be written down and treated as the very word of God, they very often have become cult leaders. Modern charismatics claim to have direct revelation from God, yet in practice they treat those supposed revelations as what they actually are—the words of man.