

CBC Sunday School
Bibliology: Authority, Sufficiency, and Necessity
October 10, 2021

“the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient.” Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory*, 2.5

“For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures... For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures.” Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.17

“There is one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source. For just as a man, if he wishes to be skilled in the wisdom of this world, will find himself unable to get at it in any other way than by mastering the dogmas of philosophers, so all of us who wish to practice piety will be unable to learn its practice from any other source than the oracles of God.” Hippolytus, *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, 9

“the sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth.” Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, 1

“Divine Scripture is sufficient above all things.” Athanasius, *Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*, pt. 1, 6

“Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” Jerome, *Commentary on the Book of Isaiah*, 18

I. Table Discussion

“If God were to send a real reformation today, what would be its target? What would be its chief doctrinal concern? My answer: the necessity of Scripture as God’s personal word.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 214

Read the quote above from John Frame. If God were to send a reformation to the Evangelical church today, why might our understanding of the necessity of Scripture be the target of that reformation? Have we fallen away from seeing Scripture as essential to faith and life? If so, how?

II. Definitions and Background

A. Authority

1. We previously discussed what Scripture asserts about itself, namely that Scripture as God's Word is authoritative. Its authority is derived from God's own authority as Lord.
2. Therefore, we won't spend much time establishing the authority of Scripture. Rather, we will explore *in what way* Scripture is authoritative, and *what* Scripture is authoritative *to do*. We want to explore its purpose, scope, and its relationship to other authorities.

B. Sufficiency

1. "Scripture contains all the divine words needed for any aspect of human life." John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 220
2. "The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains everything we need God to tell us for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 127
3. This doctrine teaches that in Scripture we have all that we *need*—though not all that can be said—about all matters of faith and practice. In scripture we find all that God has deemed it necessary for us to know about everything from parenting to cultural engagement to the Trinity to the atonement and even Scripture itself. If we never had another additional book or writing, we would still have all we need to live a faithful Christian life.
4. "it implies that in fact God *has not spoken* to mankind any more words which he requires us to believe or obey other than those which we have now in the Bible." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 130
5. The doctrine of sufficiency does not teach that Scripture will answer every question we might bring to it. The Bible does not answer all of our curiosities. It does meet all of our spiritual needs, as God has determined. Some things, like details regarding church polity and the order of worship services, are left to wisdom based on what Scripture does (and does not) say.
6. The sufficiency of Scripture does not deny that we need extrabiblical data. God and Scripture assume we will use and apply extrabiblical data. For example, when God told Adam not to eat of a specific tree, He did not have to define for Adam what a tree was. God could safely assume that Adam would use natural knowledge to discern what a tree was, and with that apply the divine command. Also, consider that to even read your English Bible, you need some education in an extrabiblical language. So, the sufficiency of Scripture does not deny use of external authorities and data. Rather, it simply forbids equating natural or general knowledge with the divine Word.
7. "Scripture contains divine words sufficient for all of life. It has all the divine words that the plumber needs, and all the divine words that the theologian needs. So it is just as sufficient for plumbing as it is for theology. And in that sense it is sufficient for science and ethics as well." John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 221

C. Necessity

1. "To say that Scripture is necessary is simply to say that we need it." John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 211
2. "The necessity of Scripture means that the Bible is necessary for knowing the gospel, for maintaining spiritual life, and for knowing God's will, but is not necessary for knowing that God exists or for knowing something about God's character and moral laws." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 116
3. Theologians have distinguished between "general" and "special" revelation. General revelation is the knowledge of God's existence and general character that is revealed to all people through creation.
4. Special revelation is God's Word given specifically to people through Jesus Christ, Scripture, prophetic words, and, to a lesser extent, visions and dreams. While general revelation has no salvific power, for all have rejected it, special revelation can bring about salvation, and indeed gospel message of Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation.

III. Models of Intellectual Authority

A. Early Church Fathers Appealed to other Sources of Christian Belief and Practice

1. Apostolic tradition – the testimony of the apostles handed down
2. The "canon of truth" or "rule of faith" – a summary of the growing doctrinal understanding of the early church.
3. Church authority – especially in appealing to church fathers for theological guidance.
4. They referred to all of these without undermining the sufficiency or supremacy of Scripture. In the same way, we might refer to confessions of faith as helpful and even authoritative guides, but not as ultimate sources or determiners of truth and practice.

B. Catholic

1. Scripture and Church Tradition as dual authorities.
2. "During the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church denied that the Bible is the sole source of divine revelation. Rather, church tradition as conveyed by the pope and magisterium, or the teaching office of the church, is needed as a supplement to Scripture. The Catholic Church also held that the Bible is not necessary for the church's existence but only for its well-being." Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology*, p. 142
3. "Such is the dignity of the apostolic traditions which did not transmit in the Scriptures, that the same veneration and the same fervent faith is due to them as to the written ones... If therefore, once we have studied the Scriptures, we see what the church universally accepts, either in the popular tradition or in the common agreement of the fathers, we must consider it as a full definition of faith as though it were found in the Scriptures." Thomas Netter Waldensis, *Doctrinale Antiquatum Fidei Catholicae Ecclesiae*, chap. 23
4. "Today, Roman Catholic theologians tend to speak not of "two sources" of revelation (Scripture and tradition), but of "one source," the stream of tradition of which Scripture is a part. Neither of these views, however, is compatible with the sufficiency of Scripture." John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 223

5. Why might it seem reasonable or wise to appeal to tradition/history as an authority on par with Scripture?
-See John 16:12-15 and Matthew 16:17-19
6. What problems arise from seeing history/tradition as an equal authority with Scripture?

C. Protestant/Reformed

1. Sola Scriptura – “By Scripture Alone”
-Sola Scriptura, one of the “five solas” of the Reformation, is the doctrine that Scripture alone is the highest authority for the Christian, and the only infallible authority for Christian faith and practice.
2. This is not to say that Scripture is the *only* authority in our lives, or that Scripture *alone* contains truth. Rather, it affirms that Scripture is our *highest* authority, and the *only infallible* source of truth.
3. Scripture is the norm that norms all other norms; or the standard by which all others standards are standardized.
4. “A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or council without it.” Martin Luther, The Leipzig Debate, July 1519
5. “Let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends... let us not take it into our heads either to seek out God anywhere else than in his sacred Word, or to think anything about him that is not prompted by his Word, or to speak anything that is not taken from that Word.” John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.21
6. “The Roman Catholic Church reacted strongly to this Reformation doctrine of the sufficiency and necessity of Scripture. It did so because the Protestant position was a direct attack on the importance of church tradition and conciliar decrees as a supplement to the Bible.” Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology*, p. 156

D. Wesleyan Quadrilateral

1. Bible; Reason; Tradition; Experience
2. What might be helpful about this model of determining truth?
3. Where might this model fall short?
4. “The Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation; so that whatever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith or be thought requisite or necessary for salvation.” *Methodist Articles of Religion*, art. 5 (1784)

IV. Scripture on the Authority, Sufficiency, and Necessity of Scripture

- A. Deuteronomy 18:20; Isaiah 29:13-14; Mark 7:8 – Scripture repeatedly condemns those who falsify God’s words, or teach the commands and traditions of men as opposed to the Word of God.
- B. 2 Timothy 3:15-17 – What is Scripture sufficient to do? For what kind of good works does it equip us?
- C. John 20:30-31 – The “limited” purpose of Scripture – that you may believe.
- D. Romans 1:18-20; Psalm 19:1-6; Acts 14:16-17; Romans 2:14-15 – By virtue of creation,

all humanity should know something about God and His attributes, and even His moral standards. Yet in sin, humans refuse God's general revelation of Himself, and do not know Him.

- E. 1 Corinthians 2:14 – Without God's help, humans cannot know Him. We need God to reveal Himself directly, specifically, and dynamically to us, by power of the Spirit.
- F. Romans 10:13-17 – To be saved, we must hear and receive the gospel specifically.
- G. John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5-6 – No one comes to the Father but through specific knowledge of and experience with Jesus Christ, the Word of God. (Note: What about Old Testament believers? See Romans 3:25 and Hebrews 11:13; John 8:56.)
- H. Matthew 4:4; 1 Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12-13; 1 Peter 2:2 – We grow by God's Word, and need His Word for nourishment.
- I. Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-12 – Jesus Himself uses Scripture to war against Satan. Do we have a stronger enemy than Satan? Can we possibly say that Scripture is insufficient?
- J. James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23 – People are brought to life by the power of the Word of God.
- K. Deuteronomy 29:29 – God has not revealed to us everything He possibly could, but He has given us everything we might need.
- L. Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Proverbs 30:5-6; Revelation 22:18-19 – Because we are not to add to or take away from Scripture, we can assume that we have what we need. Those that consider other writings as equal to Scripture, such as Mormons (Book of Mormon) or Christian Scientists (Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures) violate the sufficiency of Scripture.
- M. 1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17; Romans 14:23 – In several “catch-all” principles, Scripture speaks to every human activity and enables assessment of every human act.

V. Objections

- A. You are in danger of worshipping the Bible rather than Jesus.
 - 1. Example: Those who hold to authority, sufficiency, and necessity of Scripture are in danger of worshipping the Bible, instead of Jesus.
 - 2. Response:
 - a. In Scripture, Jesus and God are often closely associated and identified with His word, such that even God's word is exalted, and rightly so. See Acts 13:48, where they “glorify the word of the Lord.” It is not just that God is glorified, but His word is glorified. See Psalm 56:3-4 where the psalmist praises God's word. See Psalm 119:48, where the psalmist says; “I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love.”
 - b. We cannot rightly worship or love God while disobeying His Word. If your spouse asks you to pick up groceries, it is not loving to say; “I did not listen to your word, because I love you more than your word.” If you love someone, you will listen to what they say. See John 14:15, 21; 1 John 5:1-5.
 - c. Scripture often chastises God's people for not taking His commands seriously enough. Are people ever warned against taking God's words too seriously?
 - d. Generally speaking, our problem is not that we take God's words too seriously, but rather that we do not take His commands seriously enough.
 - e. Have you ever met anyone who actually worships the Bible? What does that actually mean, or look like?

- f. Most of the time, this objection is actually confronting one of two things:
 - i. Someone disagrees with Scripture, so they are seeking a way to undermine the authority of Scripture.
 - ii. Someone disagrees with your hermeneutic or interpretation of Scripture, which is a separate and different argument, that may or may not be valid.
- B. Paul used more truths beyond Scripture in his preaching.
 - 1. Example: Acts 17 and Paul's use of Greek poets; Jude's use of extrabiblical material.
 - 2. Response:
 - a. In both Acts 17 and Jude, the authors/speakers are not asserting that the extrabiblical material is inherently authoritative or truthful. They are using well-known material to support a more essential, biblical truth.
 - b. Just because extrabiblical materials are used, it does not mean they are needed. Just as modern preachers and teachers use illustrations and allusions to worldly sayings to support primary truths of God, so did biblical prophets and preachers. The use of extrabiblical material is illustrative, but not essential, to the truth of God being proclaimed.
 - c. In the same way, we may use extrabiblical material in our teaching, but should not point to this extrabiblical material as the final authority.
- C. Some of our Scripture matches other ancient literature.
 - 1. Example: The Mosaic Covenant is styled after ancient suzerain-vassal treaties; much of Proverbs matches ancient Egyptian wisdom literature; many ancient cultures have flood stories.
 - 2. Response:
 - a. All truth belongs to God, and the use of God's truth in other cultures doesn't actually undermine the authority and truthfulness of Scripture, but actually highlights its pervasive trustworthiness.
 - b. Scripture being the final authority and ultimate source of truth does not mean that truth cannot be found elsewhere. These doctrines do not teach that there is no truth outside of Scripture. They teach that there is no truth contradictory to Scripture, and that Scripture is the final arbiter of truth and authority.

VI. Modern Applications and Test Cases for the Sufficiency of Scripture

A. Revelation and the Holy Spirit

How should we understand the relationship between the sufficiency of Scripture, and the role of the Holy Spirit? Does the Spirit give authoritative revelation outside of Scripture?

"God's truth has been fully declared. Accordingly, what occurs in revelation within the Christian community is *not* new truth that goes beyond the special revelation (if so, it is spurious and not of God). It is only a deeper appreciation of what has already been revealed, or a disclosure of some message for the contemporary situation that adds nothing essentially to what he has before made known." J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective*, 3 vols. In 1, 1:43-44

B. Counseling and Mental and/or Spiritual Health

In counseling and discipling, what is the proper place of tools and innovations from medicine, psychology, sociology, etc.? How do they relate to the use of Scripture? What are the dangers in falsely understanding the role of Scripture in counseling/discipling, and the role of “extrabiblical” tools such as psychiatric theory?

C. Extrabiblical Moral Demands

The sufficiency of Scripture teaches us that nothing is sin that is not forbidden by Scripture, either by direct teaching or clear implication. What are some “extrabiblical” moral demands that are popularly taught/accepted, but not given in Scripture?

How do we avoid such extrabiblical legalism? Why are we so prone to add laws and demands that are not warranted from Scripture?

How do we distinguish between moral commands that are good and necessary consequences of Scriptural principles (for example, identity theft is not specifically addressed in Scripture, but its prohibition is a necessary application of “do not steal”), and moral commands that might be considered extrabiblical legalism?

What is the spiritual result of adding to the laws of Scripture, and its “list of sins”?

D. The Necessity of the Gospel for Salvation

Can anyone be saved without receiving the gospel message of Jesus Christ? What Scriptures specifically support your answer?

“Given that Scripture is breathed by God toward this goal—that people might be made wise unto salvation—and given that its usefulness is directed toward this same goal, how can Scripture itself not be perfect and sufficient.” Abraham Calov, *Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God*, chap. 6

“Whatever may be arrived at, or concluded from arguments, outside of that Holy Scripture... does not in any way belong to the praise and confession of Almighty God... Whatever may be arrived at outside the rule of the Holy Scriptures, nobody can lawfully demand from a Catholic.” Rupert of Deutz, *De Omnipotentia Dei*, 27

“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.” Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.6

“To me the Bible is not God, but it is God’s voice, and I do not hear it without awe.” Charles Spurgeon