

# The Sufficiency of Scripture

If you have been listening to many of the debates evangelical Christians find themselves in at the moment, perhaps you have heard a strangely common bass line underlying the variations in melody. Whether it is questions about the legitimacy or otherwise of homosexual practice for the Christian, the propriety of women preaching to mixed congregations, the shape or even the desirability of a modern affirmation of the uniqueness of Christ, or the centrality of the categories of penal substitution in an exposition of the atoning work of Christ, the same fundamental issue seems to be just under the surface. It has to do with the nature and use of the Bible, in particular the sufficiency of what the Bible teaches for Christian faith and practice. For time and again, in many different ways, some so subtle you might not even notice, we are being told that *sola scriptura* ('Scripture alone') can no longer be affirmed as it stands. This great Reformation slogan needs qualification or at least a carefully nuanced exposition. It is no longer enough simply to say 'the Bible says', if in the current epistemological quagmire you can say that at all.

## The sufficient Word in the Old Testament

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is not simply a product of the Reformation. While it was embodied in the Reformation slogan *sola scriptura*, the Reformers actually emphasized the idea because they were convinced this was the teaching of Scripture itself. The writers of the Old Testament repeatedly insist that right knowledge of God and right knowledge of how to respond to him are not to be sought outside the Word of God. Indeed, the temptation in the Garden of Eden can be understood in precisely these terms: the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil seems to promise independence from the Word of God. No longer will Adam and Eve need to receive instruction from God as to what is right and what is wrong. 'When you eat of it, the serpent suggests, 'you will be like God, knowing good and evil' (Gen 3:5).

The principle that God has given all that is necessary to truly know him and his purposes, and to live appropriately in the light of his character, his mercy towards us, and the future he has promised, is repeated throughout the Old Testament. So, in Deuteronomy 12:29-32, the Israelites are warned not to seek guidance on how to worship God from the nations around them. The only patterns of worship these nations have to offer are those which are an abomination to the living God. Instead, 'See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it'. Jeremiah would later condemn those who 'speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD' (Jer 23:16).

This commitment to the Word of God as sufficient for the knowledge of God and the ordering of the whole of life in relationship with God does not mean that God has revealed everything that could be known. Deuteronomy 29:29 points out that there are some things which we have not been told and which are best left in God's hands rather than becoming the object of wild and distracting speculation. However, the Word that God has spoken is powerful and effective. It will accomplish the purpose for which it was sent (Isaiah 55:11). Psalm 119 speaks of the Word of God which provides the pattern or purity (v. 9), generates hope (v. 74) and gives understanding (v. 130).

This sufficiency of the Word of God obviously allowed room for the development of the Old Testament. God continued to speak outside the Garden of Eden! However, it remained the Word that God had spoken, the Word that God had commanded to be written, which was alone necessary for life with Him. Likewise the sufficiency of the Word of God does not remove the possibility of engagement with other ancient texts. The biblical narratives make reference to other sources of information (e.g. the Book of the Acts of Solomon in 1 Kings 11:41) and even mention other prophets (e.g. Abijah the Shilonite and Iddo in 2 Chron 9:29). Yet all other sources have a different character from the Old Testament itself. These books alone are the Word which God has spoken and which bear the stamp of his authority. At no point in the history of the Old Testament, did believers need to fear that God had not told them enough to relate to Him properly, or that God had omitted what was necessary to order appropriately the whole of the life they lived in relationship with Him.

## The sufficient Word in the New Testament

The New Testament confirms this perspective. Again and again in the New Testament the quotation of an Old Testament text or principle suffices to establish theological truth or the appropriate response to theological truth. Jesus himself responds to the temptation in the wilderness with the threefold 'it is written' (Matt 4:4-10). Holy Scripture is apparently sufficient to answer the challenges put to him by the ancient adversary. Later, engaged in debate with the religious leaders of his day, he appeals to Scripture as the final and sufficient treatment of the issues, while his opponents demonstrate that they 'know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God' (Matt 22:23-33). The same principle is operating when Jesus answers the question 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' by pointing the inquirer back to the Scriptures with the words 'how do you read?' (Luke 10:25-26).

The sufficiency of Scripture is the point of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. Jesus tells this parable just after he has insisted that 'it is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law' (Luke 16:17). In the parable, when the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers, the reply comes 'they have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them'. (v. 29). The testimony of Moses and the prophets (i.e. the Old Testament Scriptures) provides ample basis for repentance and, what is more, 'if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if one should rise from the dead' (v. 31).

Why then is the New Testament itself needed? That, it seems, is the obvious question. However, it is important to realize that the writings of the New Testament are never presented as the necessary supplement to a deficient Scripture, any more than the later books of the Old Testament suggest a lack in the earlier ones. Prior to the coming of Jesus, no other word was necessary. But with the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, we enter a further, final stage in God's self-revelation. The goal towards which the entire Old Testament had been pointing had been reached. The restlessness that began with the promise made amidst the curse in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:15) is at last resolved. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! The apostles could, and did, preach the gospel of Christ by appealing to the Old Testament. Yet the New Testament, with its source in Jesus' promise of the Spirit to remind his disciples of what he had taught them (John 14:26) and Jesus' commission of the eleven (Acts 1:8) and Paul (Acts 9:15-16), is this final Word of God to us.

It is this whole sweep of biblical teaching which is finally caught up in 2 Timothy 3. After reminding Timothy that the sacred writings are able to make him wise for salvation (v. 15), Paul then speaks about the nature of Scripture (breathed out by God) and its usefulness in 'teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness' (v. 16). However, it is the next part that is

often overlooked. The overriding goal of Scripture is that the man of God might be 'complete, having been thoroughly equipped for every good work' (v. 17). Given the way in which Paul can quote both the Old Testament and the New as Scripture (1 Timothy 5:18), we are able to say that what God has given us in the Old Testament and through his appointed witnesses is all we need to be equipped for life as his servants.

## Can we affirm the sufficiency of Scripture today?

It is in the light of this biblical teaching that the Reformers spoke of sola scriptura. However today this principle is under attack. Some people suggest that the Scriptures do not give us all the information we need for life at the end of the twentieth century. We have a starting point and that is all. It is up to us to produce in our lives the final act in the great drama of God's dealings with the world. Others suggest that even what we do have does not fit our world at the end of the twentieth century. The structures and context of our lives are so different from those of the first century that we need a new Word, a different Word. Whether through appeal to the academic guild, fresh revelations of the Spirit, the contributions of other religions, or the decisions of bishops and synods, there seems to be an increasing reluctance to affirm that the teaching of Holy Scripture is sufficient. For some it is not sufficiently revealing; for others it is not sufficiently clear in what it does reveal.

However, to deny the sufficiency of Scripture is to say something quite serious about the character of God. Our God is Lord of all and is both able and willing to provide for his people. In his mercy he does not leave us with a Scripture that is incomplete or incomprehensible. In his wisdom he cannot have been caught by surprise by the cultural and intellectual developments of the late twentieth century. He has spoken and just as in the days of Paul and Timothy, the Word he has given is able to equip us thoroughly for life as his people.

The Bible testifies to its own sufficiency as a gift of God's grace. Perhaps it is time to unmask the unbelief that lies behind much academic, ecclesiastical and cultural pretension.



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