

GLORIOUS DOCTRINE

THE WORD OF GOD

EXPLORING THE BIBLE'S
INSPIRATION, INERRANCY,
AUTHORITY, SUFFICIENCY,
NECESSITY, CLARITY
AND MORE...

Session 3: Necessity & Sufficiency

1. SCRIPTURE'S NECESSITY

Definition

The necessity of Scripture may be defined as follows: 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 A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 116)

A. What the Bible is Necessary for

I. Knowledge of the Gospel

For, "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?... So faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ. (Romans 10:13-17)

This statement indicates the following line of reasoning:

1. **People must call upon the name of the Lord to be saved.** (In Pauline usage generally as well as in this specific context [see v. 9], "the Lord" refers to the Lord Jesus Christ.)
2. **People can only call upon the name of Christ if they believe in him** (that is, that he is a Savior worthy of calling upon and one who will answer those who call).
3. **People cannot believe in Christ unless they have heard of him.**
4. **They cannot hear of Christ unless there is someone to tell them about Christ** (a "preacher").

5. **Therefore, saving faith comes by hearing** (that is, by hearing the gospel message), and this hearing of the gospel message comes about through the preaching of Christ. The implication seems to be that without hearing the preaching of the gospel of Christ, no one can be saved.¹

This passage is one of several that show that eternal salvation comes only through belief in Jesus Christ and no other way. Speaking of Christ, John 3:18 says, "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Similarly, in John 14:6 Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."²

"The Bible is necessary for salvation, then, in this sense: one must either read the gospel message in the Bible for oneself, or hear it from another person. Even those believers who came to salvation in the old covenant did so by trusting in the words of God that promised a Savior to come." (Grudem, Systematic Theology, 117)

"In fact, these repeated instances of people trusting in God's words of promise, together with the verses above that affirm the necessity of hearing about and believing in Christ, seem to indicate that sinful people need more on which to rest their faith than just an intuitive guess that God might provide a means of salvation. It seems that the only foundation firm enough to rest one's faith on is the word of God itself (whether spoken or written)." (Grudem, Systematic Theology, 117-118)

"Thus, although it will be argued below that people can know that God exists and can know something of his laws apart from Scripture, it seems that there is no possibility of coming to saving faith apart from specific knowledge of God's words of promise." (Grudem, Systematic Theology, 118)

II. Maintaining Spiritual Life

Jesus says in Matthew 4:4 (quoting Deut. 8:3), "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (NASB). Here Jesus indicates that our spiritual life is maintained by daily nourishment with the Word of God, just as our physical lives are maintained by daily nourishment with physical food. To neglect regular reading of God's Word is as detrimental to the health of our souls as the neglect of physical food is detrimental to the health of our bodies.

Similarly, Moses tells the people of Israel of the importance of God's words for their lives: "For it is no trifle for you, but it is your life and thereby you shall live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess" (Deut. 32:47). And Peter encourages the Christians to whom he writes, "Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 116-117.

² Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 117.

it you may grow up to salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). The "pure spiritual milk" in this context must refer to the Word of God about which Peter has been speaking (see 1 Peter 1:23–25).

The Bible, then, is necessary for maintaining spiritual life and for growth in the Christian life.³

III. Certain Knowledge of God's Will

"In fact, if there were no written Word of God, we could not gain certainty about God's will through other means such as conscience, advice from others, an internal witness of the Holy Spirit, changed circumstances, and the use of sanctified reasoning and common sense." (Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 119)

In the Bible, however, we have clear and definite statements about God's will. God has not revealed all things to us, but he has revealed enough for us to know his will: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

To be "blameless" in God's sight is to "walk in the law of the LORD" (Ps. 119:1). The "blessed" man is one who does not follow the will of wicked people (Ps. 1:1), but delights "in the law of the LORD," and meditates on God's law "day and night" (Ps. 1:2). To love God (and thereby to act in a way that is pleasing to him) is to "keep his commandments" (1 John 5:3). If we are to have a certain knowledge of God's will, then, we must attain it through the study of Scripture.

(Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 119.)

IV. Certainty of any knowledge

In fact, in one sense it can be argued that the Bible is necessary for certain knowledge about anything. A philosopher might argue as follows: The fact that we do not know everything requires us to be uncertain about everything we do claim to know. This is because some fact unknown to us may yet turn out to prove that what we thought to be true was actually false.

If we do not know all the facts in the universe, past, present, and future, how can we ever attain certainty that we have correct information about any one fact?

Ultimately, there are only two possible solutions to this problem: (1) We must learn all the facts of the universe in order to be sure that no subsequently discovered fact will prove our present ideas to be false; or (2) someone who does know all the facts in the universe, and who never lies, could tell us some true facts that we can then be sure will never be contradicted.

³ *ibid.*, 118

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 119)

Now it is from this infinite storehouse of certain knowledge that God, who never lies, has spoken to us in Scripture, in which he has told us many true things about himself, about ourselves, and about the universe that he has made. No fact can ever turn up to contradict the truth spoken by this one who is omniscient.

Thus, it is appropriate for us to be more certain about the truths we read in Scripture than about any other knowledge we have. If we are to talk about degrees of certainty of knowledge we have, then the knowledge we attain from Scripture would have the highest degree of certainty: if the word "certain" can be applied to any kind of human knowledge, it can be applied to this knowledge.

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 120)

This concept of the certainty of knowledge that we attain from Scripture then gives us a reasonable basis for affirming the correctness of much of the other knowledge that we have.

in a fallen world knowledge gained by observation of the world is always imperfect and always liable to error or misinterpretation. Therefore the knowledge of God and creation gained from Scripture must be used to interpret correctly the creation around us. Using the theological terms that we will define below, we can say that we need special revelation to interpret general revelation rightly.

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 121)

B. What the Bible is NOT Necessary for

I. Knowing That God Exists

People can obtain a knowledge that God exists and a knowledge of some of his attributes simply from observation of themselves and the world around them. David says, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). To look at the sky is to see evidence of the infinite power, wisdom, and even beauty of God; it is to observe a majestic witness to the glory of God.

These evidences of God are all around us in creation to be seen by those who are willing to see them.

Even those who by their wickedness suppress the truth cannot avoid the evidences of God's existence and nature in the created order:

For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. (Rom. 1:19–21)

Here Paul says not only that creation gives evidence of God's existence and character, but also that even wicked men recognize that evidence.

(Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 121)

Thus, even without the Bible, all persons who have ever lived have had evidence in creation that God exists, that he is the Creator and they are creatures, and have also had some evidence of his character. As a result, they themselves have known something about God from this evidence (even though this is never said to be a knowledge that is able to bring them to salvation).⁴

II. Knowing Something About God's Character and Moral Laws

Paul goes on in Romans 1 to show that even unbelievers who have no written record of God's laws still have in their consciences some understanding of God's moral demands. Speaking of a long list of sins ("envy, murder, strife, deceit ..."), Paul says of wicked people who practice them, "Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die they not only do them but approve those who practice them" (Rom. 1:32). Wicked people know that their sin is wrong, at least in large measure.

When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them ..." (Rom. 2:14–15)

The consciences of unbelievers bear witness to God's moral standards, but at times this evidence of God's law on the hearts of unbelievers is distorted or suppressed.⁵

The knowledge of God's laws derived from such sources is never perfect, but it is enough to give an awareness of God's moral demands to all mankind.

C. General & Special Revelation

The knowledge of God's existence, character, and moral law, which comes through creation to all humanity, is often called "general revelation" (because it comes to all people generally). General revelation comes through observing nature, through seeing God's

⁴ Ibid., 122

⁵ Ibid.

directing influence in history, and through an inner sense of God's existence and his laws that he has placed inside every person. General revelation is distinct from "special revelation" which refers to God's words addressed to specific people, such as the words of the Bible, the words of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, and the words of God spoken in personal address, such as at Mount Sinai or at the baptism of Jesus.

The fact that all people know something of God's moral laws is a great blessing for society, for unless they did there would be no societal restraint on the evil that people would do and no restraint from their consciences. Because there is some common knowledge of right and wrong, Christians can often find much consensus with non-Christians in matters of civil law, community standards, basic ethics for business and professional activity, and acceptable patterns of conduct in ordinary life.

The knowledge of God's existence and character also provides a basis of information that enables the gospel to make sense to a non-Christian's heart and mind: unbelievers know that God exists and that they have broken his standards, so the news that Christ died to pay for their sins should truly come as good news to them.

But how the holiness and justice of God can ever be reconciled with his willingness to forgive sins is a mystery that has never been solved by any religion apart from the Bible. Nor does the Bible give us any hope that it ever can be discovered apart from specific revelation from God. It is the great wonder of our redemption that God himself has provided the way of salvation by sending his own Son, who is both God and man, to be our representative and bear the penalty for our sins, thus combining the justice and love of God in one infinitely wise and amazingly gracious act. This fact, which seems commonplace to the Christian ear, should not lose its wonder for us: it could never have been conceived by man alone apart from God's special, verbal revelation.

(Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 122–123)

The Bible never views human speculation apart from the Word of God as a sufficient basis on which to rest saving faith: such saving faith, according to Scripture, is always confidence or trust in God that rests on the truthfulness of God's own words.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- When you are witnessing to an unbeliever, what is the one thing above all others that you should want him or her to read? Do you know of anyone who ever became a Christian without either reading the Bible or hearing someone tell him or her what the Bible said? What then is the primary task of an evangelistic missionary? How should the necessity of Scripture affect our missionary orientation?

- Do you nourish your soul on the spiritual food of the Word as carefully and diligently as you nourish your body on physical food? What makes us so spiritually insensitive that we feel physical hunger much more acutely than spiritual hunger? What is the remedy?
- When we are actively seeking to know God's will, where should we spend most of our time and effort? In practice, where do you spend most of your time and effort when seeking to find God's will? Do God's principles in Scripture and the apparent guidance we receive from feelings, conscience, advice, circumstances, human reasoning, or society ever seem to conflict? How should we seek to resolve the conflict?
- Is it a hopeless task to work for civil legislation based on standards that accord with God's moral principles in Scripture? Why is there good reason to hope that we will finally be able to persuade a great majority of our society to adopt laws consistent with scriptural norms? What would hinder this effort?

2. SCRIPTURE'S SUFFICIENCY

Definition

We can define the sufficiency of Scripture as follows: 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 A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 127)

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

Here Paul indicates that one purpose for which God caused Scripture to be written is to train us that we might be "equipped for every good work." If there is any "good work" that God wants a Christian to do, this passage indicates that God has made provision in his Word for training the Christian in it. Thus, there is no "good work" that God wants us to do other than those that are taught somewhere in Scripture: it can equip us for every good work.

A similar teaching is found in Psalm 119: "Blessed are those whose way is blameless who walk in the law of the LORD!" (v. 1). This verse shows an equivalence between being "blameless" and "walking in the law of the LORD": those who are blameless are those who

walk in the law of the Lord. Here again is an indication that all that God requires of us is recorded in his written Word: simply to do all that the Bible commands us is to be blameless in God's sight.

To be morally perfect in God's sight, then, what must we do in addition to what God commands us in Scripture? Nothing! Nothing at all! If we simply keep the words of Scripture we will be "blameless" and we will be doing "every good work" that God expects of us.

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 127–128)

A. We can find answers

We Can Find All That God Has Said on Particular Topics, and We Can Find Answers to Our Questions

But the truth of the sufficiency of Scripture is of great significance for our Christian lives, for it enables us to focus our search for God's words to us on the Bible alone and saves us from the endless task of searching through all the writings of Christians throughout history, or through all the teachings of the church, or through all the subjective feelings and impressions that come to our minds from day to day, in order to find what God requires of us.

This doctrine means, moreover, that it is possible to collect all the passages that directly relate to doctrinal issues such as the atonement, or the person of Christ, or the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life today. In these and hundreds of other moral and doctrinal questions, the biblical teaching about the sufficiency of Scripture gives us confidence that we will be able to find what God requires us to think or to do in these areas.

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 128–129)

Simply stated, the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture tells us that it is possible to study systematic theology and ethics and find answers to our questions.

At this point we differ from Roman Catholic theologians, who would say that we have not found all that God says to us about any particular subject until we have also listened to the official teaching of the church throughout its history. We would respond that although the history of the church may help us to understand what God says to us in the Bible, never in church history has God added to the teachings or commands of Scripture: Nowhere in church history outside of Scripture has God added anything that he requires us to believe or to do. Scripture is sufficient to equip us for "every good work," and to walk in its ways is to be "blameless" in God's sight.

...To this we would reply that our search for answers to theological and ethical questions is not a search to find what various believers have thought in the history of the church, but is

a quest to find and understand what God himself says to us in his own words, which are found in Scripture and only in Scripture.

(Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 129)

B. Sufficient for each stage of Redemptive History

The Amount of Scripture Given Was Sufficient at Each Stage of Redemptive History

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does not imply that God cannot add any more words to those he has already spoken to his people. It rather implies that man cannot add on his own initiative any words to those that God has already spoken. Furthermore, 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 A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 129)

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.”
(Deuteronomy 29:29)

This verse reminds us that God has always taken the initiative in revealing things to us. He has decided what to reveal and what not to reveal. At each stage in redemptive history, the things that God had revealed were for his people for that time, and they were to study, believe, and obey those things. With further progress in the history of redemption, more of God's words were added, recording and interpreting that history

(Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 129–130)

For Christians today, the words from God that we have in the Old and New Testaments together are sufficient for us during the church age. After the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and the founding of the early church as recorded in the New Testament, and the assembling of the books of the New Testament canon, no further central redemptive acts of God in history (acts that have direct relevance for all God's people for all subsequent time) have occurred, and thus no further words of God have been given to record and interpret those acts for us.

This means that we can cite Scripture texts from throughout the canon to show that the principle of the sufficiency of God's revelation to his people at each particular time has remained the same.

The following texts from Scripture thus apply to us also in that sense:

You shall not add to the word which I command you nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. (Deut. 4:2)

Everything that I command you you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it or take from it. (Deut. 12:32)

Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words lest he rebuke you, and you be found a liar. (Prov. 30:5–6)

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22:18–19)

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 130)

C. Practical Applications

I. You can discover God's will for you

The sufficiency of Scripture should encourage us as we try to discover what God would have us to think (about a particular doctrinal issue) or to do (in a particular situation). We should be encouraged that everything God wants to tell us about that question is to be found in Scripture. This does not mean that the Bible answers all the questions that we might think up, for "The secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deut. 29:29). But it does mean that when we are facing a problem of genuine importance to our Christian life, we can approach Scripture with the confidence that from it God will provide us with guidance for that problem.

There will of course be some times when the answer we find is that Scripture does not speak directly to our question.

As we go through life, frequent practice in searching Scripture for guidance will result in an increasing ability to find accurate, carefully formulated answers to our problems and questions. Lifelong growth in understanding Scripture will thus include growth in the skill of rightly understanding the Bible's teachings and applying them to specific questions.

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 130–131.)

II. We don't add to Scripture

The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that we are to add nothing to Scripture and that we are to consider no other writings of equal value to Scripture. This principle is violated by almost all cults and sects...

...Even in Christian churches a similar error is sometimes made when people go beyond what Scripture says and assert with great confidence new ideas about God or heaven, basing their teachings not on Scripture but on their own speculation or even on claimed experiences of dying and coming back to life.

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 131)

III. Anything not found in Scripture is NOT required for us to believe

The sufficiency of Scripture also tells us that God does not require us to believe anything about himself or his redemptive work that is not found in Scripture.

God has caused to be recorded in Scripture everything that we need to know about Jesus' words and deeds in order to trust and obey him perfectly

IV. No modern revelations are equal to Scripture's authority

The sufficiency of Scripture shows us that no modern revelations from God are to be placed on a level equal to Scripture in authority.

We must insist that God does not require us to believe anything about himself or his work in the world that is contained in these revelations but not in Scripture.

The Bible contains everything we need God to tell us for trusting and obeying him perfectly.

It should also be noted at this point that whenever challenges to the sufficiency of Scripture have come in the form of other documents to be placed alongside Scripture (whether from extrabiblical Christian literature of the first century or from the accumulated teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, or from the books of various cults such as the Book of Mormon), the result has always been (1) to deemphasize the teachings of the Bible itself and (2) to begin to teach some things that are contrary to Scripture. This is a danger of which the church must constantly be aware.

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 132)

V. Only what Scripture forbids is sin

With regard to living the Christian life, the sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that nothing is sin that is not forbidden by Scripture either explicitly or by implication.

This also is an important principle because there is always the tendency among believers to begin to neglect the regular daily searching of Scripture for guidance and to begin to live by a set of written or unwritten rules (or denominational traditions) concerning what one does or does not do in the Christian life.

Furthermore, whenever we add to the list of sins that are prohibited by Scripture itself, there will be harm to the church and to the lives of individual believers. The Holy Spirit will not empower obedience to rules that do not have God's approval from Scripture, nor will believers generally find delight in obedience to commands that do not accord with the laws of God written on their hearts. In some cases, Christians may repeatedly and earnestly plead with God for "victory" over supposed sins that are in fact no sins at all, yet no "victory"

will be given, for the attitude or action in question is in fact not a sin and is not displeasing to God. Great discouragement in prayer and frustration in the Christian life generally may be the outcome.

One clear example of such an addition to the commands of Scripture is found in the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church to “artificial” methods of birth control, a policy that finds no valid support in Scripture. Widespread disobedience, alienation, and false guilt have been the result. Yet such is the propensity of human nature to make such rules that other examples can probably be found in the written or unwritten traditions of almost every denomination.

(Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 133)

VI. Only what Scripture tells us is required of us

The sufficiency of Scripture also tells us that nothing is required of us by God that is not commanded in Scripture either explicitly or by implication. This reminds us that the focus of our search for God’s will ought to be on Scripture, rather than on seeking guidance through prayer for changed circumstances or altered feelings or direct guidance from the Holy Spirit apart from Scripture. It also means that if someone claims to have a message from God telling us what we ought to do, we need never assume that it is sin to disobey such a message unless it can be confirmed by the application of Scripture itself to our situation.

Christians who are convinced of the sufficiency of Scripture should begin eagerly to seek and find God’s will in Scripture. They should be eagerly and regularly growing in obedience to God, knowing great freedom and peace in the Christian life. Then they would be able to say with the psalmist:

I will keep your law continually,
for ever and ever;
and I shall walk at liberty,
for I have sought your precepts ...
Great peace have those who love your law;
nothing can make them stumble.
(Ps. 119:44–45, 165)

(Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 133–134)

VII. We should emphasize only what Scripture does

The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that in our doctrinal and ethical teaching we should emphasize what Scripture emphasizes and be content with what God has told us in Scripture.

It is characteristic of many cults that they emphasize obscure portions or teachings of Scripture (one thinks of the Mormon emphasis on baptism for the dead, a subject that is mentioned in only one verse in the Bible [1 Cor. 15:29], in a phrase whose exact meaning is apparently impossible now to determine with certainty).

The doctrinal matters that have divided evangelical Protestant denominations from one another have almost uniformly been matters on which the Bible places relatively little emphasis, and matters in which our conclusions must be drawn from skillful inference much more than from direct biblical statements. For example, abiding denominational differences have occurred or have been maintained over the “proper” form of church government, the exact nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper, the exact sequence of the events surrounding Christ’s return, the categories of persons who should be admitted to the Lord’s Supper, the way in which God planned that the merits of Christ’s death would be applied to believers and not applied to unbelievers, the proper subjects for baptism, the correct understanding of the “baptism in the Holy Spirit,” and so forth.

(Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 134)

However, since all of these topics receive relatively little direct emphasis in Scripture it is ironic and tragic that denominational leaders will so often give much of their lives to defending precisely the minor doctrinal points that make their denominations different from others. Is such effort really motivated by a desire to bring unity of understanding to the church, or might it stem in some measure from human pride, a desire to retain power over others, and an attempt at self-justification, which is displeasing to God and ultimately unedifying to the church?

(Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 134–135)

3. THE NECESSITY & SUFFICIENCY IN CHURCH HISTORY

Although true of the early church, this insistence on Scripture’s sufficiency and necessity was abandoned as the church developed. 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. The Protestant Reformers disagreed and once again championed the sufficiency and necessity of the Bible. Scripture is sufficient to know God and to trust and obey him completely; therefore, the church does not need anything (tradition, magisterium) or anyone (the pope) to supplement the Word of God. Also, Scripture is necessary; therefore, the church could not even exist apart from

the Word of God. Evangelical churches follow the Protestant Reformers in affirming both of these attributes of Scripture, though they at times find it difficult to live these two realities.

(Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 142–143)

The Early Church

Christians who wrote after the New Testament was completed continued to emphasize the sufficiency and necessity of the Bible. With great simplicity, Tertullian stated, “I revere the fullness of His [God’s] Scripture.” Vincent of Lerins emphasized that “the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient.” Practically speaking, Scripture’s sufficiency makes it the sole standard for Christian belief. Clement of Alexandria underscored this point in a chapter entitled “On Scripture as the Criterion by Which Truth and Heresy Are Distinguished.” His argument was simple: The source of Christian teaching is God, and he has instructed believers “through the prophets, the Gospel, and the blessed apostles” (i.e., the Old Testament, the four Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament). This teaching is like an axiom in math or a first principle in philosophy: It has no need of proof, nor is it capable of being corrected. Rather, it is the standard by which everything else is evaluated.

Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 143.

In light of this, true belief has to be established by Scripture, as Cyril of Jerusalem noted: “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.” Heresy, on the contrary, is anything that does not conform to the touchstone of Scripture, as Clement of Alexandria explained:

“Heretics have it within their ability to provide themselves with proper proofs for the divine Scriptures from the Scriptures themselves. But they select only what contributes to their own pleasures. They have a craving for fame and so willfully evade by various means the things communicated by the blessed apostles and teachers, things that are wedded to inspired words. They oppose the divine tradition by human teachings in order to establish their heresy.”

(Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 7.16, in ANF, 2:553–54)

Similarly, Athanasius attacked heresy by constant appeal to Scripture, affirming, “the sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth.”

(Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 144)

“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 [teachings] of philosophers, so all of us who wish to practice piety [holiness] will be unable to learn its practice from any other source than the oracles of God. Whatever things, then, the Holy Scriptures declare, at these let us look; and whatever they teach, these let us learn.... But even as He [God] has chosen to teach them by the Holy Scriptures, so let us discern them.”

(Hippolytus, Against the Heresy of One Noetus, 9, in ANF, 5:227)

Indeed, the necessity of Scripture means Christians must engage in daily Bible reading, as Theonas of Alexandria underscored:

“Let no day pass by without reading some portion of the Sacred Scriptures, at such convenient hour as offers, and giving some space to meditation. And never cast off the habit of reading in the Holy Scriptures; for nothing feeds the soul and enriches the mind so well as those sacred studies do.”

(Theonas of Alexandria, The Epistle of Theonas, Bishop of Alexandria, to Lucianus, the Chief Chamberlain, 9, in ANF, 6:161.)

With the necessity of Scripture in mind, John Chrysostom rebuked Christians who thought they did not need the Bible because they were not monks (men who lived a religious life by withdrawing from involvement in the world):

“This belief ... has ruined you, because you need it much more than they do. For those who live in the world and each day are wounded are the ones who have the most need of medicine.... The things that are contained in Scripture—do you not think they are highly necessary?”

(Chrysostom, The Gospel of Matthew: Homily 2, in NPNF1, 10:13)

Church traditions and other writings

An important development took place in the early church that became the background for later controversies concerning the Bible. Without diminishing in any way the sufficiency and necessity of Scripture, the early church fathers made reference to other sources of Christian beliefs and practices. These were:

- I. **Apostolic Tradition** - the testimony of the apostles as it was handed down in the proclamation and teaching of the early churches (1 Cor. 11:23; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6)
- II. **The canon of truth** - or the rule of faith, a summary of the growing doctrinal understanding of the early church
- III. **Church Authority** - especially the practice of appealing to the church fathers in support of theological positions.

In no case did any of these three oppose, correct, or supplement Scripture so as to endanger its sufficiency and necessity.

I. Apostolic Tradition

Apostolic tradition was eventually written down; indeed, the apostles, who at one time proclaimed the gospel publicly, “at a later period, by the will of God, handed [it] down to us [wrote it] in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.” Prior to the composition of the New Testament canon (toward the end of the fourth century), however, the oral and written forms of the apostolic witness to Christ worked in tandem. Together, Scripture and apostolic tradition provided the foundation of truth for the early church. Heretics, those outside of the church, were criticized because they “consent neither to Scripture nor to tradition.”

II. The Canon of Truth

The canon of truth, or the rule of faith, was a means of emphasizing what true churches believed and a way of exposing groups that promoted heresy. It was a succinct expression of early church beliefs and was derived from Scripture itself. These beliefs would later be expressed in written creeds or statements of faith.

III. Church Authority

Appeals to church authority, specifically to the writings of the early fathers, were never undertaken to divest the Bible of its authority and sufficiency. Rather, in its fight against heresy, the church underscored those earlier writings so as to bolster its case for the truth of the beliefs to which it held. Its teachings were sound because they were the truths to which the church had always clung; they were not the innovations of heretics. As Vincent of Lerins explained:

“But here someone perhaps will ask, because the canon of Scripture is complete and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the church’s interpretation? For this reason—because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters. For Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, another, Iovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, another, lastly, Nestorius another. Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of ecclesiastical and catholic interpretation.”

(Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory*, 2.5, in *NPNF2*, 11:132)

Thus, the authority of the church’s interpretation was not in opposition to the sufficiency of Scripture but functioned as support for the proper understanding of sufficient Scripture over against heretical interpretations of it.

As Jerome warned: “The sword of God smites whatever they [heretics] draw and forge from a pretended apostolic tradition, without the authority and testimony of the Scriptures.” Whatever challenges to Scripture developed later from a changing relationship between the Bible, tradition, and church authority, these other sources of Christian beliefs and practices never threatened the sufficiency and necessity of Scripture in the early church.

(Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 145–147)

Necessity & Sufficiency in the Reformation to Now

Although the doctrine of the necessity and sufficiency of Scripture became more and more obscured over time in the church of the middle ages, this doctrine was re-established at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century.

For example, in his criticism of indulgences (the selling of the remission of sins), Luther urged: “A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it. As for the pope’s decree on indulgences, I say that neither the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture. For the sake of Scripture, we should reject pope and councils.”⁶

Luther argued:

“Those things that have been delivered to us by God in the holy Scriptures must be sharply distinguished from those that have been invented by men in the Church; it matters not how eminent they are for saintliness or scholarship.”

(Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in *Three Treatises*, 223)

When confronted by the Catholic Church and urged to change his mind on this issue, Luther responded with these very famous words:

“Unless I am convicted [convinced] by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”

John Calvin warned:

“Let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends. For how can the human mind measure off the measureless essence of God according to its own little measure ...? Let us then willingly leave to God the knowledge of himself. But we shall be “leaving it to him” if we conceive him to be as he reveals himself to us, without inquiring about him elsewhere than from his Word. And let us not take it into our heads

⁶ The Leipzig Debate (July 1519)

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.”

(Calvin, Institutes, 1.13.21, LCC, 1:146)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In the process of growing in the Christian life and deepening your relationship with God, approximately how much emphasis have you placed on reading the Bible itself and how much on reading other Christian books? In seeking to know God's will for your daily life, what is the relative emphasis you have put on reading Scripture itself and on reading other Christian books? Do you think the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture will cause you to place more emphasis on reading Scripture itself?
- What are some of the doctrinal or moral questions you are wondering about? Has this chapter increased your confidence in the ability of Scripture to provide a clear answer for some of those questions?
- Have you ever wished that the Bible would say more than it does about a certain subject? Or less? What do you think motivated that wish? After reading this chapter, how would you approach someone who expressed such a wish today? How is God's wisdom shown in the fact that he chose not to make the Bible a great deal longer or a great deal shorter than it actually is?
- If the Bible contains everything we need God to tell us for obeying him perfectly, what is the role of the following in helping us to find God's will for ourselves: advice from others; sermons or Bible classes; our consciences; our feelings; the leading of the Holy Spirit as we sense him prompting our inward desires and subjective impressions; changes in circumstances; the gift of prophecy (if you think it can function today)?
- In the light of this chapter, how would you find God's "perfect" will for your life? Is it possible that there would be more than one "perfect" choice in many decisions we make? (Consider Ps. 1:3 and 1 Cor. 7:39 in seeking an answer.)
- Have there been times when you have understood the principles of Scripture well enough with regard to a specific situation but have not known the facts of the situation well enough to know how to apply those scriptural principles correctly? In seeking to know God's will, can there be any other things we need to know except (a) the teaching of Scripture and (b) the facts of the situation in question, together with (c) skill in applying (a) to (b) correctly? What then is the role of prayer in seeking guidance? What should we pray for?

