

# Pro Pastor

VOL. 2, NO. 2 | FALL 2023

A JOURNAL OF GRACE BIBLE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

GRECO-ROMAN  
LITERATURE?

SECOND TEMPLE  
LITERATURE?

BABYLONIAN  
LITERATURE?

*The Sufficiency of*  
**SCRIPTURE** +

SECULAR  
PSYCHOLOGY?

SOCIOLOGY?

IN ALL THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES

PHILOSOPHY?

CHURCH GROWTH  
STRATEGIES?



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A JOURNAL OF GRACE BIBLE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

## **The Sufficiency of Scripture in All Theological Disciplines**

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# Pro Pastor

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## The Sufficiency of Scripture in All Theological Disciplines

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**GRACE BIBLE**  
**THEOLOGICAL**  
**SEMINARY**

# Editor's Introduction

The current issue of *Pro Pastor* focuses on the sufficiency of Scripture in all theological disciplines: New Testament, Old Testament, systematic theology, apologetics, preaching, and counseling. The doctrine of scriptural sufficiency joyfully affirms that God's written word is adequate for man's salvation, doctrine, and holiness. However, we are living in a day in which some of the most basic beliefs that we once took for granted are being challenged in every discipline, both in terms of (a) our view of what Scripture is, and (b) its ability to speak with clarity apart from other sources of so-called "wisdom."

An obsession with Second Temple Jewish literature has flooded New Testament studies, an unhealthy preoccupation with ancient Near Eastern literature has crept into Old Testament studies, and a fixation on church tradition has invaded systematic theology. At the same time, philosophy pervades apologetics, church growth strategies shape preaching, and secular psychology overwhelms counseling. In every discipline, influential "experts" are calling for practitioners to use sources *outside of Scripture* as the lens through which Scripture must be rightly interpreted. But from a functional standpoint, this approach ends up elevating external sources to a status *higher than* the Bible.

Our team of contributors wants to push against this growing tide! We are not afraid of interacting with outside sources, and we gladly do so at times, but our Christian message is not some kind of muddled synthesis of divine and human wisdom. While extrabiblical sources can help

add color to our understanding of the Scriptures, we heartily maintain that Christians can interpret the Bible without first becoming experts in other bodies of literature. God has breathed out the Scriptures in a way whereby those with the Spirit *can* understand God's revelation (2 Tim 3:16–17)! The academy in our day seems to be losing sight of the fact that God has spoken clearly, and Spiritual things are Spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:14), even by the unlearned.

In the present issue of our journal, Ardel B. Caneday tackles the question of the sufficiency of Scripture in New Testament studies, Preston B. Kelso examines current thinking on the adequacy of God's word in Old Testament studies, and Owen Strachan, on the same doctrine, gives an incisive evaluation of his own sphere of expertise, systematic theology. In the practical disciplines, James R. White looks at the relation between the Bible and human reasoning in apologetics, Rob Davis analyzes scriptural sufficiency in relation to preaching, and Wayne A. Mack uses his expertise in the area of counseling to critique his own field.

For every biblical and theological discipline, there is a simple question that must be posed: *Is the Bible enough?* As we delve into this quandary in the following pages, the stakes could not be higher, for the Christian's confidence will hang in the balance until this question is resolved. •

**JEFF MOORE**  
Editor

# The Sufficiency of Scripture in New Testament Studies

by Ardel B. Caneday

## INTRODUCTION

Most Christians have heard pastors, Bible teachers, or friends return from Israel raving about how their recent tour of the Holy Land “unlocks the Bible” for them. With wonder, they recount how standing on Mount Carmel brings to life the prophet Elijah’s contest with the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18). They tell of how traversing the streets of Galilee, where Jesus walked, opens up the four Gospels as never before. They effusively recount walking in the footsteps of Jesus along the Via Dolorosa and entering the empty tomb. This naive posture tends to render Christians susceptible to the notion that some crucial aspects of understanding the Bible reside *outside* the biblical text.

Even Bible teachers fall prey to this notion. During my first tour of Israel, our group had the privilege of hearing a presentation by a renowned biblical scholar who frequently lectured throughout the Middle Eastern countries. Reputed to be a foremost interpreter of the Jewish culture during the life of Jesus, he presented a lecture on John 4, the account concerning Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. Many in the classroom sat spellbound as he expounded the account by drawing from his numerous observations of Middle Eastern culture as a resident.

This lecturer observed that the well would not have had a bucket tied to a rope for drawing water. He

claimed that travelers would have carried a foldable leather bucket to collect water, but evidently, Jesus’s disciples had the bucket with them when they departed and went into town. Likewise, drawing on his cultural observations, this biblical scholar explained that the Samaritan woman’s journey to the well alone during the midday heat hints that she was an outcast among her fellow Samaritans. Cultural mores called for Jesus, while approaching the well, not to engage the woman in conversation but to retreat several feet from her to show it was safe and appropriate for her to come closer. Jesus, however, did not withdraw from her but instead held his ground, and worse, he broke the social taboo by speaking to her.

While listening to the lecture, I was struck by two observations. First, I noticed how others sat spellbound as if hearing the account from John 4 for the first time. Second, I marveled that the lecturer enraptured his hearers with details that are present *within the biblical text itself*, but he, perhaps without realizing it, framed those aspects as if he discovered them in resources outside the text of John’s Gospel.

Following the lecture, through conversations with others who heard the presentation, I realized that many naively came to think that (a) the apostle John’s account was insufficient by itself, and (b) background knowledge derived from other resources was essential for grasping



the truths being conveyed. I realized that I was witnessing an exercise, doubtless intended for good by the lecturer, that nonetheless was misleading many to suppose that the Fourth Gospel's account of Jesus and the woman at the well was not sufficient, calling for the acquisition of social-cultural knowledge outside the Bible to grasp the account's significance.

The truth is that anyone who reads the account concerning Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman can readily discern from the text of John's Gospel, either explicitly or implicitly, that the woman was on society's fringe. Jesus characterizes this woman as one who had multiple husbands and was in an illicit relationship with a man who was not her husband (John 4:16–18). One can readily infer from the text that this is why the woman came to the well by herself during the middle of the day (“about the sixth hour”) when other women would not be present because of the heat (v. 6).<sup>1</sup> Also, the text expressly states, by way of the woman's attentiveness, that Jesus had no means by which he could draw water from the deep well (v. 11). Likewise, John the Evangelist plainly informs the reader that when Jesus's disciples returned to him, “they marveled that he was talking with a woman” (v. 27).

Because John's Gospel sufficiently informs readers concerning each of these cultural aspects integral to the account, special knowledge of the culture derived from outside the biblical text is both extraneous and superfluous. Thus, whenever we read the Scriptures, especially narrative portions such as in the four Gospels, we should expect that the immediate textual setting sufficiently provides what is necessary for correctly understanding the passage.

The occasion portrayed above may seem innocent and harmless because the interpretive details derived from outside the biblical account are truly present in the biblical text. Yet a question is fitting: Do such incidents become the seductive gateway to a sinister subjection of Scripture to external authorities? The demeanor of both the Holy Land lecturer and his listeners exhibited an inclination to look to resources outside the Bible to authorize the correct interpretation of the biblical text. Does this posture pose a challenge to Scripture's authority? If so, does it threaten the proper grounding of our faith? Hence, we must consider whether appeals to resources outside the Holy Scriptures subvert our longstanding Protestant doctrine called “The Sufficiency of Scripture.”

### SCRIPTURE'S SUFFICIENCY

What do we mean when we speak of Scripture's sufficiency? Question and answer 3 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism succinctly expresses the range of Scripture's sufficiency:

Q. What do the Scriptures principally teach?

A. The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.<sup>2</sup>

This means that the Scriptures are sufficient for the specific task for which God gave them. The Scriptures reveal who God is, who humans are in relation to God, and how we should portray this relationship in worship of our Creator. The Scriptures are sufficient to ground our trust in God and to know what God requires of us. However, when we say that Scripture is sufficient, we do not mean that Scripture alone is necessary for our growth in the gospel. Scripture tells us that God calls the church to gather together to worship him (Heb 10:25), and he has provided teachers

<sup>1</sup> Biblical quotations in this article are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> See also question and answer 6 of the Baptist Catechism. *Westminster Confession of Faith: Together with the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs*, 3rd ed. (1647; repr., Atlanta: PCA Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990), question and answer 3; *The Baptist Catechism: With Proof Texts* (1695; repr., Knightsstown, IN: Particular Baptist Heritage Books, 2021), question and answer 6.

and preachers to expound the Scriptures for our edification and spiritual growth as Christians (Eph 4:11–12). Likewise, the Lord gives elders and deacons to govern the church wisely and to guard the doctrinal affirmations of the Christian faith (1 Tim 3:1–13).

Likewise, we must not subject God or his Scriptures to mockery as if the Bible answers every question we could ever pose. It does not. Most of our daily routines—cooking meals, our vocational callings, home ownership and maintenance, car repair, problems with our computers, etc.—call for authoritative information outside the Bible. Nevertheless, we Protestant Christians believe that Scripture suffices as the ground of our knowing God and ourselves in relation to our Creator. Thus, all our affirmations must be consistent with Scripture’s teachings. So, Scripture suffices as our governing guide for Christian faith and behavior. While Scripture does not specifically state how we Christians are to position ourselves in relation to our culture or to cast our voting ballots in any election, local or national, the Bible contains sufficient authoritative guidance concerning what our view of the world should be in whatever culture we find ourselves.

### SCRIPTURE’S SUFFICIENCY AND RESOURCES OUTSIDE THE BIBLE

The Scriptures came to us by the direct agency of God’s Spirit working harmoniously with the divinely appointed human writers so that the result of this concursive process is that the human authors’ activities of thinking and writing were not coerced. Their activities were free and spontaneous, yet at the same time, divinely prompted and governed. Thus, Scripture, written for our good, is not merely a human production but God’s own authoritative word concerning the redemption of his created order. The Bible has human authors and one overarching divine Author.

God’s written word authorizes ministers of the gospel to train Christians concerning the good news that is in Jesus. It authorizes Christian parents to do the same for their children. When we affirm the sufficiency of Scripture, we do not put resources that supplement the Bible out of bounds for ministers and parents. Scripture’s sufficiency does not prohibit our use of a rich and vast library of resources to assist our study of God’s word. Libraries of theological seminaries and Christian universities are rightly stocked not only with an array of biblical commentaries, biblical language tools, theological volumes, and books on Christian apologetics, but also books on all the disciplines of learning—anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, linguistics, literature, mathematics, medicine, philosophy, political science, psychology, sociology, and the various sciences.

Thus, Abraham Kuyper’s biblical reasoning is praiseworthy when, during his inaugural address at the dedication of The Free University of Amsterdam (1880), he asserted:

Man in his antithesis as fallen *sinner* or self-developing *natural creature* returns again as “the subject that thinks” or “the object that prompts thought” in every department, in every discipline, and with every investigator. Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: “Mine!”<sup>3</sup>

Kuyper offered this appraisal to counter anyone who might allow for Christian theology to have its own department in a university but who would dismiss the notion that theology is a constituent aspect of every academic discipline, whether the sciences, medicine, law, economics, history, psychology, or linguistics. He correctly

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<sup>3</sup> James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488. Emphasis in original.

envisioned the Christian university wherein all learners acknowledge that theology is the core discipline of learning and the one that permeates the entire curriculum so that every academic discipline submits to Christ's Lordship as revealed in Scripture. Oh, how far short of this ideal our Christian institutions of learning fall!

As Protestants, we correctly affirm *sola Scriptura* because Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and conduct, the final authority by which we are to judge (a) the Bible itself and (b) the Christian doctrine and practice that the Bible teaches. Yet, we must be wary lest we fall into either of the two ditches that line our pathway.

The first temptation, to shut ourselves up to Scripture alone as our only resource of learning for human life, is to find ourselves in the ditch of obscurantism, restricting knowledge concerning God's world to what is revealed in the Bible. The Bible is not an encyclopedic life guide. In fact, Scripture itself teaches us that God reveals himself in his created order (Rom 1:18–21).

The second temptation, a much more seductive ditch, elicits greater enticements. This is the allurement about which Kuyper implicitly warned and into which many scholars in Christian universities have stumbled. The error is that we must somehow integrate or synthesize learning

derived from the created universe with Christian faith revealed in God's Scriptures.<sup>4</sup> Academicians who embrace this deceptive premise as true regularly constrain the Scriptures to accommodate their interpretation concerning the "evidence" their research uncovers in support of theories which contradict the plain sense of Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

This false premise induces Old Testament scholars and even apologists to abandon the plain sense of Genesis 1–11 in favor of explaining the biblical text as "mytho-history" akin to what they deem to be parallel accounts in ancient Near Eastern records. Though they deny doing so, they subvert Scripture's authority by appealing to an external authority.<sup>6</sup> Archaeological discoveries often provide evidence that confirms the truthfulness of the Bible's claims. However, when biblical scholars and apologists exploit ancient pagan accounts and records to interpret (or reinterpret) the Holy Scriptures, as when they expound Genesis 1–11, they undermine the sufficiency of Scripture's testimony concerning what we are obligated to believe.

To fall into this latter ditch invariably induces scholars to flirt with another transgression of Christian doctrine, the notion that Scripture's inerrancy is "limited" to matters that pertain explicitly to the Christian faith.<sup>7</sup> This error, not at all rare in Old Testament studies, is more

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<sup>4</sup> Ardel Caneday, "Integration of Faith and Thought Is Not the Scholar's Work but the Creator's Work Already Accomplished," keynote address for the Twin Cities Undergraduate Theology Conference, University of Northwestern—St. Paul, St. Paul, MN, April 7, 2022. From the conclusion: "The Creator established and integrated his created order into a comprehensive, cohesive, and coherent whole that *now*, though dwelling under God's curse, is also *already* reconciled in Christ Jesus 'until he has put all his enemies under his feet' (1 Corinthians 15:25). What does 'to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven' mean if it does not include the established *integration* of all things? Thus, to claim that integration is our work enormously exaggerates our role as *learners who seek knowledge* and severely slights God's creative and new creative work in Christ *who makes himself known* to us. Our responsibility is to acknowledge God's integrated, harmonious creation, to submit to God's created order with a view to examining it to discover God's providential sustaining of his reconciled created order. Thus, we are obliged to acknowledge that every truth, regardless of the field of study, is theological in nature, for every truth we may discover is already reconciled with all other truths because all are grounded alone in God's Son who created and sustains reality." Emphasis in original.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Denis O. Lamoureux, *Evolution: Scripture and Nature Say Yes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 25–44.

<sup>6</sup> See Ardel B. Caneday, "A Misguided Quest for the Historical Adam: Implications for our View of Scripture," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 26, no. 2 (2022): 48–68.

<sup>7</sup> Denis Lamoureux explicitly promotes "limited inerrancy," calling it the "message-incident principle." By this phrase he means that God accommodated errant ancient science as the *incidental vehicle* to convey his *inerrant message*. Lamoureux illustrates his point: "The ancient science in Scripture is essential for transporting spiritual truths. It acts like a cup that holds water. Whether a cup is made of glass, plastic, or metal is incidental. What matters is that a vessel is needed to bring water to a thirsty person." Denis Lamoureux, *Evolution: Scripture and Nature Say Yes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 90.

subtle among scholars whose work focuses on the New Testament and, therefore, not as readily discernible. So, we now turn to discern the principal way in which New Testament scholars tend to subvert Scripture's sufficiency.

## SECOND TEMPLE LITERATURE AS THE RESOURCE FOR INTERPRETING JESUS AND PAUL

At erudite meetings, beginning a generation ago with the rise of postmodernism, biblical scholars frequently discussed and lectured on where the meaning of a literary text resides. Should we look for meaning in what the author intended? Should we focus on the reader's experience of the text? Or is it a combination of factors that yields a text's meaning? At that time, "reader-response theory" was a concept that rivaled inquiry into the author's intended meaning. The effects of those discussions are with us to this day.

Unsurprisingly, some biblical scholars began to employ a version of the reader-response theory that significantly influenced their interpretation of Scripture. Of course, anyone who employs this theory for interpreting a text must consider who the author's initial hearers or readers were. Since the Bible's texts are ancient, biblical scholars who accept some version of the "reader-response theory" to expound the Scriptures find it necessary to become conversant not only with the cultural aspects but also the beliefs of ancient Israelites. Scholars do this by mining the prolific deposits of Jewish literature following the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple (c. 516 BC), around the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, and during the time of the Temple's destruction by Roman armies during the Jewish revolt in AD 70.<sup>8</sup>

Among the scholars who held significant roles in the discussion a generation ago, one stands out. N. T. Wright, a prominent scholar whose impact on New Testament studies is incalculable, led the way for other academicians (and laymen) to alter their interpretation of the teachings of Jesus and the apostle Paul. As an undergraduate student at Oxford University, Wright was the president of the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (OICCU). He confidently affirmed theological beliefs he was pleased to describe as "Calvinistic, Augustinian or Reformed, since any system of divinity stands or falls according as it is, or is not, thoroughly Scripture-based, and in harmony with the entire content of God's Holy Word."<sup>9</sup> In his student days, Wright endorsed the following affirmation as a contributing author of a book entitled *The Grace of God in the Gospel*:

Justification by faith is the heart of the Gospel. This is what is contained in the promise, "Whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." If we fail to grasp the fact that the righteousness which justifies us is *imputed* and not infused or inherent, we shall find that, in substance, what we preach is a gospel of works, not a Gospel of grace.<sup>10</sup>

However, Wright underwent a significant transformation from those initial beliefs. Observe how Wright's former beliefs concerning justification contrast with his later (current) beliefs. Now he reasons:

If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the more well-known pieces of literature from the Second Temple period include what is known as the Apocrypha (e.g., Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Bel and the Dragon), the Pseudepigrapha (e.g., 1 Enoch, Jubilees), the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g., Qumran Sectarian Writings, Septuagint, Damascus Document, portions of every Old Testament book except Esther), Talmudic and Rabbinic literature, Philo, and Josephus.

<sup>9</sup> John Cheeseman, Philip Gardner, Michael Sadgrove, and Tom Wright, *The Grace of God in the Gospel* (1972; repr., Edinburgh, UK; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Cheeseman, Gardner, Sadgrove, and Wright, *Grace of God in the Gospel*, 48.

the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom.... To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how language works.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to this distorted parody of the traditional Protestant expression of God's justifying verdict pronounced to the believing sinner, it is crucial to observe Wright's caricature of everyone who maintains that justification entails imputed righteousness. According to him, most Protestants are oblivious to the fact that both Jesus and Paul were keenly aware of being participants in the unfolding drama of God's dominion over his created order so that the gospel has political ramifications for first-century Jews and Gentiles within the Roman Empire. Wright elaborates:

If we are to locate both Jesus and Paul within the world of first-century Judaism, within the turbulent theological and political movements and expectations of the time (and if we are not then we should admit that we know very little about either of them) then we must face the fact that neither of them was teaching a timeless system of religion or ethics, or even a timeless message about how human beings are saved. Both of them believed themselves to be actors within the drama staged by Israel's God in fulfillment of his long purposes. Both, in other words, breathed the air of Jewish eschatology.<sup>12</sup>

Despite attempts to camouflage it, all our doing theology is to some extent unavoidably autobiographical. Our theological speech discloses the simplicity or maturity of our beliefs. Thus, when Wright characterizes his former beliefs concerning justification in God's courtroom, he reveals how simplistic his former beliefs were in that they:

(1) failed to acknowledge the progress of redemptive history, (2) viewed Jesus and Paul as teachers of a "timeless system of religion" without reference to a God-given covenant, (3) assumed that the Pharisees and Judaizers were devoted to a system of works-righteousness, and (4) supposed that the gospel message is strictly individualistic without eschatological ramifications of Christ's lordship over the entirety of God's created order. Wright now assigns these immature beliefs, formerly his own, to anyone who still believes, as he once did, that God acquits believers by imputing to them all that belongs to Jesus Christ (Rom 8:31–39).

When we respond to Wright's caricature of Protestant biblical scholars, we are obligated not to reciprocate in kind and not to mischaracterize his views. Many respondents to Wright's pale imitation of the Reformed understanding are inclined to adopt a defensive posture, uncritically passing over some crucial foundational questions. Why did Wright undertake such a significant adjustment to his understanding of the apostle Paul's doctrine of justification before God? What now grounds his interpretation of Jesus and Paul? What authorizes his theological formulations?

Wright explains:

Saul, I used to believe, was a proto-Pelagian, who thought he could pull himself up by his moral bootstraps. What mattered for him was understanding, believing, and operating a system of salvation that could be described as "moralism" or "legalism": a timeless system into which one plugged oneself in order to receive the promised benefits, especially "salvation" and "eternal life," understood as the post-mortem bliss of heaven.

I now believe that this is both radically anachronistic (this view was not invented in

<sup>11</sup> N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 98.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 178–79.

Saul's day) and culturally out of line (it is not the Jewish way of thinking)....

But Saul of Tarsus was not interested in a timeless system of salvation, whether of works-righteousness or anything else. Nor was he interested simply in understanding and operating a system of religion, a system of "getting in" and/or "staying in" ... He wanted God to redeem Israel.<sup>13</sup>

What authorizes Wright's new perspective on Jesus's teaching in the Gospels and on the apostle Paul's teaching in his letters? On what basis does he stake his claim? To what does he attribute his major revision concerning how he characterizes the apostle Paul's beliefs prior to and after his conversion, when Christ Jesus confronted him on his way to Damascus to arrest Jews who believed in the resurrected Messiah?

Wright attributes his shift to the influence of the publication of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* by E. P. Sanders in 1977.<sup>14</sup> Sanders reassessed the diverse range of religious beliefs within Judaism prior to and contemporaneous with the time of Jesus and Paul. From his analysis of Second Temple Jewish literature, Sanders contends that Protestant Christians since the Reformation have significantly misjudged Judaism, especially the beliefs of the Pharisees. So, Wright grounds his "new perspective on Paul" (and on Jesus) *outside* the biblical text, in his and Sanders's reading of diverse forms of Judaism through intertestamental Jewish literature. Wright explains:

Judaism in Paul's day was not, as has regularly been supposed, a religion of legalistic works-righteousness. If we imagine that it was, and that Paul was attacking it as if it was, we will do great violence to it and to him. Most Protestant exegetes had read

Paul and Judaism as if Judaism was a form of the old heresy Pelagianism, according to which humans must pull themselves up by their moral bootstraps and thereby earn justification, righteousness, and salvation. No, said Sanders. Keeping the law within Judaism always functioned within a covenantal scheme. God took the initiative, when he made a covenant with Judaism; God's grace thus precedes everything that people (specifically, Jews) do in response. The Jew keeps the law out of gratitude, as the proper response to grace—not, in other words, in order to *get* into the covenant people, but to *stay* in. Being "in" in the first place was God's gift.<sup>15</sup>

Whether Sanders and Wright correctly assess the varieties of Second Temple Judaism as neither holding nor promoting a religion of works-righteousness is a fair question that has occupied most respondents. That, however, is not the focus of this article. Rather, our chief concern is that Wright, following Sanders, grounds his interpretation of Jesus's engagement with the Pharisees and Paul's opposition to the Judaizers *not within but outside* the biblical text.

It is noteworthy that Wright argues that Protestants continue to ground their understanding of the Pharisees and the Judaizers in the sixteenth-century Pelagian system of works-righteousness that Protestant Reformers, like Martin Luther and John Calvin, opposed. Wright argues that the Reformers wrongly retrofitted sixteenth-century Roman Catholic dogma and practice onto first-century Judaism, particularly in reference to the Pharisees and Judaizers. Essentially, Wright objects that Luther identified himself with Jesus and Paul while associating Roman Catholics and Papists with the Pharisees and Judaizers, thus treating the latter as if they

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 18–19. Despite Wright's general agreement with Sanders, he faults him for assessing ancient Judaism's religion without accounting for the "political dimension."

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 18–19. Emphasis in original.

were full-blown works-righteousness proponents. Wright's criticism correctly requires each of us to carefully assess the warrant for how we read and teach the Scriptures. We must ask ourselves: What grounds our characterization of the Pharisees and Judaizers? Does Scripture itself warrant such a depiction of these two groups?

It is highly ironic that Wright fails to acknowledge that he, as a scholar, does the same sort of "reading in" that he accuses Luther of practicing. While Wright faults Luther for superimposing his medieval battle with Roman Catholicism onto Jesus's and Paul's conflicts with the Pharisees and Judaizers, respectively, Wright superimposes his interpretation of Second Temple Judaism onto the Pharisees and Judaizers with whom Jesus and Paul had to contend. If Luther and his theological descendants unwittingly and wrongly reshape the Pharisees and Judaizers to medieval Romanist teaching and practice, does not Wright wrongly do the same, only taking his cues from a *different* source, that of Jewish Second Temple literature?<sup>16</sup>

If Wright is convinced that Luther and the Protestant tradition mischaracterize the Jews, the Pharisees, and the Judaizers whom we encounter within the pages of the Bible, why is the biblical text not sufficient to demonstrate the truthfulness of his objection? Why does Wright, like those he faults, go outside the biblical record to authorize his character sketches of the Jewish opponents of Jesus and Paul? Why, for Wright, does not the biblical text suffice? Why does Wright not demonstrate from the biblical character sketches *within Scripture* that the Reformers and their theological progeny mischaracterize the Jewish opponents of the gospel that Jesus and Paul preached?

## CONCLUSION

If Wright is correct that the Jews who opposed Jesus and Paul did not hold to a system of works-

righteousness, why does he not demonstrate this point from Scripture? Why does he find the authority for his claims in literature outside the Bible? If the Protestant tradition has wrongly retrojected sixteenth-century Roman Catholicism onto the biblical characterizations of Pharisees and Judaizers, one needs to demonstrate *from the biblical text itself* Protestantism's mischaracterization. Appealing to literature outside the Bible to correct this alleged error is to commit the very same mistake.

The reality is that Scripture itself is sufficient in its depiction of both the Pharisees and Judaizers. The apostle Paul testifies that he was a Pharisee, "advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal 1:14). Thus, should not Paul's own characterization of the doctrinal opponents he faces suffice as authoritative? If not, why not? Paul notes, "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed" (v. 9). When Paul, a Jew and former Pharisee, conclusively and emphatically announces this curse upon his Judaizing opponents in Galatia who proclaim a "different gospel," we are obliged to account for his characterization of their teaching and practice within his letter to the Galatians, whatever it is. And if the "different gospel" they preach is not a system of works-righteousness, then we are obligated to demonstrate this from the apostle's portrayal of them, not by looking in extrabiblical literature.

The Gospels, the Book of Acts, and Paul's letters unequivocally characterize the Jews as rejecting Jesus of Nazareth, their long-awaited promised Messiah. The Pharisees and chief priests regarded Jesus as a threat and disrupter to their dominance over Jewish religious life (John 11:48). Their religious zeal to maintain the purity of the law of Moses, the Temple, and synagogues from Jesus's

<sup>16</sup> In fairness, it must be pointed out that Wright's sources for interpretation come from a time period that is much closer to that of Jesus and Paul, even overlapping them.

teaching about God's kingdom consumed them to conspire against him and put him to death.

Some Jews, who professedly acknowledged Jesus as the promised Messiah, zealously insisted upon the permanence of the Mosaic law with its requirement of circumcision and observance of food laws and holy days, thus regarding the Messiah as subject to the law covenant rather than fulfilling it. They preached that Gentiles must receive circumcision whereby they would then become Abraham's seed (Acts 15:1; Gal 5:2). Such Judaizers inverted the gospel promise, namely, that Gentiles and Jews, together, become Abraham's seed by belonging to Jesus Christ, who is the true seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16, 29). The Judaizers' prioritizing of Abraham over his Seed, the Messiah (3:16), and of Mosaic law over the one who perfectly *fulfilled* the law (4:4), is the fundamental error Paul counters in his letter to the Galatians.

Whether Paul's opponents taught a system of works-righteousness must be demonstrated or invalidated on the authority of the biblical text, not from outside of it. The validity or invalidity of Luther's lens of medieval Roman Catholicism or Wright's lens of Second Temple Judaism must be assessed by the ultimate standard of biblical truth. Scripture's portrayal of the theological errors of both the Pharisees and Judaizers is utterly sufficient—otherwise, Scripture no longer stands as the norming norm. •

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# The Sufficiency of Scripture in Old Testament Studies

by Preston B. Kelso

## INTRODUCTION

The Old Testament presents interpreters with tremendous challenges. This reality should not, however, provoke discouragement in pastors and teachers who seek to understand and explain the Old Testament in their preaching and teaching ministries. When discussing the sufficiency of Scripture, the framers of the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith 1689 (2LBCF) stated that, unlike God’s revelation in nature, God’s revelation in Scripture is sufficient “to give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation” (1.1). In discussions about the sufficiency of the Old Testament, the pinpointed scope stated in 2LBCF is important, namely, salvation. When reading the whole Bible, the Old Testament establishes the framework and storyline which becomes the context for God’s full revelation of salvation in the New Testament (Rom 15:4).

To interject a related attribute of Scripture to the present discussion (alongside of sufficiency), the “perspicuity” of Scripture is a term employed by theologians to say that the Scriptures are clear in their meaning and message. To affirm the doctrine of perspicuity is not to abolish all hermeneutical difficulties but rather to affirm the overall coherence and unity of the scriptural narrative. This is the position of the 2LBCF, which acknowledges in chapter 1, “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all,” while also asserting, “yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and

observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them” (1.7).

An affirmation of the “perspicuity” of Scripture is not an assertion that every Christian will obtain a comprehensive understanding of everything that Scripture teaches, but it is an affirmation that the overarching story (metanarrative) of Scripture can be apprehended by a plain reading of the text (i.e., through ordinary means). The proper purview of biblical perspicuity is the salvific unity of the biblical canon, and this limited scope is critical for our purposes in the present discussion. Ambiguous passages, ethical dilemmas, and polemical undercurrents might appear to threaten the perspicuity of Scripture if the term aims at an exhaustive grasp of everything that Scripture teaches. However, if the arguments for biblical sufficiency and perspicuity are focused on the reader’s ability to correctly understand the overall saving message of the biblical story, then these threats are less potent.

## CASE STUDIES FOR SCRIPTURAL SUFFICIENCY IN OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS

Interpreters of the Old Testament encounter a host of exegetical challenges in various texts. One example is Moses’s tantalizingly brief account of the “Nephilim” (Gen 6:4) shortly before the flood narrative, in which the intended referent

of the term is ambiguous.<sup>1</sup> A second example is the recurring theme of concubinage in the Old Testament, which uncomfortably inhabits the narratives of some of the most renowned characters of Israel (Abraham, Gideon, David, and Solomon, among others) with a practice that contradicts the marriage ethic of the earlier creation account (Gen 2:24). A third example is the interaction between the Hebrews and the Egyptians in the book of Exodus, as scholars muse over whether subtle polemical undercurrents are at play in the humiliation of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

These are only a sample of the issues that interpreters of the Old Testament encounter. Such difficulties, and many others, can be found in numerous texts of the Old Testament narrative. The trajectory of modern scholarship is to suggest that these stories can only truly be understood when read through the lens of ancient Near Eastern (ANE) texts outside the Bible (extrabiblical sources). The ensuing discussion of these issues is an attempt to demonstrate that historical and contextual information may be helpful for *adding color* to elements of these narratives, but it is in no way *necessary* for apprehending a basic understanding of the biblical message.<sup>2</sup>

### IS SCRIPTURAL SUFFICIENCY THREATENED BY LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY?

Moses's reference to the "Nephilim" in Genesis 6:4 leads to no shortage of questions for the perceptive reader of Scripture. Evidence of extensive inquiry on this verse is borne out by the voluminous amount of literature, beginning in the Second Temple period, that has been written about it. The verse is shrouded in ambiguities.

First, the Hebrew term *Nephilim* could mean "fallen ones"<sup>3</sup> (i.e., fallen angels), or perhaps, "great ones" (i.e., "men of renown"). The translation "giants" (KJV, NKJV) is possible, but it is most likely the result of equating the Nephilim of Genesis 6 with the Nephilim of Numbers 13, where they are described in the Hebrew Masoretic Text as "men of great measure" (cf. the Greek Septuagint's "very long men").<sup>4</sup> The identity of the Nephilim is so ambiguous that Sailhamer suggests that even Moses's audience needed the clarifying statements, "the heroes of old ... men of renown."<sup>5</sup>

Second, the chronological referents of Genesis 6:4 are not obvious. What is meant by Moses's statement "the Nephilim were on the earth *in those days and also afterward*"? These phrases could be a reference to (a) long and extensive pre-flood and post-flood eras, or to (b) an initial period "when the sons of God came into the daughters of man" and an immediately subsequent period. The first option would present two eras of long duration; the second option would envision short and concise divisions within a united time period. The former interpretation necessitates the perpetuation of the Nephilim even after the flood, while the latter option emphasizes the pervasive nature of the procreative activity of the Nephilim, possibly to ascribe to them the blame for mankind's growing wickedness leading up to the flood.

A third issue in Genesis 6:4 is trying to identify the "sons of God" and the "daughters of man." Some interpreters understand the "sons of God" to be a reference to fallen angels (or even deities), and the "daughters of man" to refer to human beings. Other interpreters, both classic and modern, have

<sup>1</sup> The English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible will be used in this article, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the space limitations of this article, a comprehensive discussion of any one of these issues is not possible. Genesis 6:4 is a notoriously difficult text that (a) harbors major implications for the interpretation of other ambiguous Old Testament texts, and (b) carries heavy ramifications for whole-Bible, canonical interpretation, and thus, it will be given the lengthiest consideration of the three test cases.

<sup>3</sup> The etymological relationship between *Nephilim* and the Hebrew verb *naphal*, "to fall," is uncertain but suggested by many scholars.

<sup>4</sup> In Genesis 6:4 and Numbers 13:33 the Hebrew word *Nephilim* is rendered in the Septuagint with the Greek terms *gigantes* and *gigantas*, respectively, with the evident meaning, "giants." While this is a fair representation of the meaning of the Hebrew in the Kadesh Barnea passage (Num 13:33), the same is not necessarily true of the Genesis narrative. The question of whether the term *Nephilim* is applied generally as a descriptor of different peoples at different periods in time or as a singular reference to the same group is an unsettled question in Old Testament scholarship. It is especially complicated by the issue of the Nephilim existing on the earth during the pre-flood period but somehow surviving into the post-flood era.

<sup>5</sup> John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:78–79.

insisted on equating the “sons of God” with the godly descendants of Seth and the “daughters of man” with the ungodly descendants of Cain.<sup>6</sup> This second major interpretation is not a rationalistic attempt to explain away the suggestion of the “sons of God” as a designation for angelic beings who procreated with humans, but rather, it is a harmonization of the narrative with the theological precommitment that angels cannot engage in sexual relations.<sup>7</sup>

A fourth interpretative puzzle is the precise nature of the relationship between the Nephilim, the “sons of God,” and the “daughters of man.” Some interpreters argue that the Nephilim are the offspring that resulted from the procreative activity described in Genesis 6:4. If this was a supernatural intermingling of fallen angels and human beings, it most naturally fits with an understanding of the Nephilim as giants, men who were genetically different from and in many ways superior to ordinary human offspring. If the “sons of God” and “daughters of man” are both genetically human, it works against the idea that the pre-flood Nephilim were genetic mutants (“giants”), but it also opens the door to an additional interpretative problem—it is unlikely that Moses would describe the biological descendants of the murderer Cain (Gen 4:8) in such an honorific way as “men of renown.”<sup>8</sup>

Simply put, one who is seeking to understand and explain this text is confronted with a dizzying array of interpretive options. My proposal is that the Scriptures are sufficiently clear, such that the message of Genesis 6:4 can be deduced by situating the text within its immediate context and by simply asking the question, “How does this text contribute

to the metanarrative to which it is attached?” Additionally, the interpreter should seek to understand how the text in question and its larger pericope was understood and used by the authors of the New Testament. Interpreters, especially those who are preaching or teaching on this passage in the context of church ministry, should not presume that they can only really understand this text once they have resolved each interpretative difficulty. A true understanding of a particular biblical text does not demand an exhaustive understanding of each constituent part. There is room for some remaining vestiges of ambiguity within a biblically faithful model of interpretation.

Extrabiblical information, for all of its usefulness, is not absolutely necessary for understanding the meaning of a given text. All of the data needed to arrive at a conclusive understanding of the text is present *within Scripture itself*. One does not need access to and information from ancient Near Eastern culture to understand the trajectory of the narrative in Genesis 6, even if it is marginally helpful for understanding what is meant, for example, by the phrase “men of renown” (whether these men are renowned for their political power, stature, etc.).<sup>9</sup> Gerhard von Rad suggests that the motif of divine envy in ancient Near Eastern literature may shed light on the original purpose of the Nephilim account, “to account aetiologically for the origin of heroes from [angelic-human] marriages.”<sup>10</sup> But this conclusion is predicated on a host of historical-critical presuppositions that deny biblical inspiration and cause von Rad to miss the plain meaning of the text.

Situating the text in its canonical context yields a sufficient understanding of Genesis 6:4. The larger

<sup>6</sup> This view is commonly referred to as the “Sethite” view.

<sup>7</sup> The idea that angels cannot reproduce has historically been tied to Jesus’s statement in Matthew 22:30 (cf. Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34–36), though not exclusively. If such a conclusion is to be drawn from Jesus’s words in that passage, it can only be done inferentially. The subject under consideration there is marriage, not procreation. Procreation is possible, though not permissible, outside of the marriage relationship.

<sup>8</sup> For a thorough discussion of the Hebrew term here translated “mighty [men],” see Robin Wakely, “*gbr*,” *NIDOTTE* 1:806–15.

<sup>9</sup> E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 45. Speiser points to the Yale Tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh as an example of how a similar construction is used in an Akkadian text. The implication is that this outside source authenticates and clarifies the meaning of the Hebrew phrase. A layperson having no knowledge of or access to this particular piece of literature may deduce that such information is necessary to understanding the meaning of the phrase, “men of renown,” when it simply is not the case.

<sup>10</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 115.

narrative in which the Nephilim and the “sons of God” are embedded is situated in a particular point in time, “When man began to multiply on the face of the land” (Gen 6:1). The narrative proceeds in the context of God’s resolute judgement: “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever” (6:3a), which is God’s response to humanity’s increasing rebellion against the Creator (6:5–6). Ultimately this universal rebellion—beyond even the actions of the Nephilim and the “sons of God”—serve as the provocation for God to destroy humanity through the flood (6:7).

The narrative then returns to Noah in Genesis 6:8–10, whom Moses had previously introduced in 5:32. It is important to pause and think about the intervening text between Noah’s introduction and his re-emergence in the narrative. Genesis 6:1–7 is a pericope within the larger Noahic narrative that communicates to the reader the proliferation of wickedness on the earth in his days and establishes God’s rationale for the central event involving Noah in the Old Testament, the great flood. Man’s depravity and ripeness for judgment are the clear and pressing focal themes of the overall passage.

The ominous references to the Nephilim, “the mighty men of old, the men of renown,” and the “sons of God”—however one determines to understand them—contributes no more or no less to the picture of unchecked depravity than the conclusive statement that “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (6:5). The brief account of the Nephilim is not unimportant to the story, but it is not the focal point of Genesis 6:1–7. God made explicit to Noah what had already been explained to the reader, that man’s wickedness had grown intolerable and that he would destroy them along with the rest of his created order (6:13), thus commencing the story of the biblical flood.

An ambiguous text like Genesis 6:4 can become sufficiently clear when it is situated in its immediate context. In addition to these contextual considerations, the interpreter should also seek to understand the text by looking to the authoritative

interpretation of the New Testament. When the New Testament alludes to, builds upon the theology of, or directly quotes the Old Testament, it stands as the most authoritative interpretation of the specific Old Testament text or narrative. Genesis 6:4 provides an opportunity to consider two issues relative to this crucial step in the interpretative process. First, there are numerous examples of the New Testament referring to the larger narrative to which Genesis 6:4 is a part, and this reality gives insight into the heart of its message. Second, because Genesis 6:4 is not directly cited in the New Testament, it provides an opportunity to consider how an authoritative interpretation of a text may be reached in the absence of a direct New Testament citation.

The New Testament makes frequent appeal to the larger narrative (Gen 6–9) in which the difficult text of Genesis 6:4 belongs. The present discussion surveys only some of these references, and only in the broadest terms, to demonstrate how the New Testament corroborates the assertion above that Genesis 6:4 is intended primarily to communicate the dire moral and spiritual condition on the earth in the days immediately preceding the Noahic flood. The inclusion of Noah in the Lukan genealogy of Jesus confirms that God’s intervention to save Noah and his family was preservation of the line of Abraham’s descendants, a point that is exceptionally clear in Genesis. If the reader of Genesis 6:4 has concluded that the “sons of God” are fallen angels who procreated with human women in an attempt to corrupt humanity made in his image (Gen 1:26), Luke 3:36’s reference to Noah is a pointed statement that this effort failed. There is a redemptive line, the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), that ultimately finds its goal in the Messiah himself.

Jesus invoked the story of Noah, particularly the condition of humanity at the outset of the flood narrative, to describe his post-resurrection return in judgment (Matt 24:37–38; cf. Luke 17:26–27). Jesus described humanity as aloof, mired in the affairs of life on earth, and indifferent to the affairs of heaven. He did this looking backward to the “days of Noah” and forward to the “coming of the Son of Man.”

The deteriorating condition of mankind described in Genesis 6:1–4, then, is not only active rebellion against God, but passive indifference to the divine appraisal of man’s actions.

The epistolary literature of the New Testament condenses the narrative of Genesis 6–9 down to two themes. The great flood was a decisive act of judgment against “the world of the ungodly” (2 Pet 2:5; cf. Heb 11:7b). It was also a demonstration of God’s willingness to save those who believed and obeyed his word (Heb 11:7a; 1 Pet 3:20; 2 Pet 2:5). Taken together, the New Testament looks to the narrative of Genesis 6–9 as God’s triumphant salvation accomplished in spite of man’s pervasive wickedness. Genesis 6:4, for all of the questions it raises, represents a powerful example of the latter of these twin themes.

The New Testament does not directly cite Genesis 6:4. This is not an unusual scenario in the interpretation of the Old Testament, which contains many stories, psalms, proverbs, and other verses that are not explicitly cited in the New Testament. Suggestions have been made that Jude’s reference to “the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling” (Jude 6) is an allusion to Moses’s text and its reference to the “sons of God.” Jude’s reference to the Book of 1 Enoch (Jude 14–15) confirms the author’s awareness of that document and the traditions that it contained, including its extended discussion of the fallen angels who had purportedly procreated with human women. But the connection is inconclusive.

The solution to finding an authoritative interpretation of these texts is to relate them to the larger narrative to which they belong—in the case before us, this means connecting Genesis 6:4 to the larger narrative of Genesis 6–9. We must seek to understand what contribution the smaller unit of text makes to the larger whole. It is clear

that Genesis 6:4, whatever the interpretation of the individual details may be, highlights the ominous, sinister wickedness of mankind that occasioned God’s judgment in the flood. This central focus, in turn, illuminates the gracious character of God to act savingly on Noah and humanity’s behalf. One could hold to any view of the Nephilim, the “sons of God,” the “daughters of men,” the nature of the sin committed in Genesis 6:4, and the relationship between these parties (from the options presented above) and still arrive at the same conclusion about the primary meaning of this difficult text. The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture affirms the reader’s ability to understand the central message, not to resolve all of the minutiae that the text presents.

### **IS THE OLD TESTAMENT SUFFICIENT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE MORALLY OBJECTIONABLE ACTIONS OF ITS HEROES?**

Encountering texts shrouded in ambiguity presents its own set of interpretative problems. However, when the text of the Old Testament highlights the moral failures of its protagonists, the interpretative dilemma is of a different nature. The actions of many biblical heroes are often so obvious and flagrant that they seem to beg for an alternative explanation. The morally dubious practice of concubinage in the Old Testament, akin to polygamy, provides one glaring example.

Various interpretations of texts involving moral failure in the Old Testament have been proposed. One way these issues are dealt with involves proposing re-readings of the text that rationalize the character’s actions, even if the conclusion directly contradicts Scripture’s statements on the issue. In such approaches, biblical authority and biblical perspicuity are supplanted.<sup>11</sup>

Another way of dealing with ethical dilemmas in the Old Testament is to be dismissive, treating grave sins with a response akin to “people make

<sup>11</sup> A recent example of this approach is seen in J. Richard Middleton’s attempt to present Abraham’s offering of Isaac as a missed opportunity for lament and a story of moral failure. J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence: The Binding of Isaac, The Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021).

mistakes.” Such refusal to grapple with the seriousness of sin, especially when committed by some of the Bible’s most notable characters, undermines the themes of man’s depravity, God’s steadfast loyalty to his people, and the severity of God’s actions to save his people, all of which are central to the biblical story.

A third way of dealing with Old Testament ethical conundrums is to appeal to extrabiblical sources, particularly the social customs and worldviews of Israel’s neighbors in the ancient Near East. The intention behind this method includes a desire to help modern readers contextualize ancient and unfamiliar practices. Understanding the cultural milieu in which practices like concubinage, for example, took place, can aid the interpreter in understanding the text. But the key question is: Are such cultural-historical insights necessary? Is the reader lost without them?

The practice of concubinage is an example of moral failure by many of Israel’s heroes. Nevertheless, Abraham, Jacob, and Gideon are all recorded among the notable forefathers of the Christian faith in Hebrews 11. So too, David and Solomon, the preeminent kings of Israel, also acquired many wives and concubines, directly contributing to Israel’s peril (1 Kgs 11:4–6).

In Genesis 16, Abraham and Sarai found themselves growing old and childless, an issue that they believed jeopardized the covenantal promises that God had made with Abraham to “make of [him] a great nation” (Gen 12:2) and to give him descendants more numerous than the stars of heaven (15:5). Sarai’s proposed solution was for Abraham to have relations with her Egyptian servant, Hagar, so that she might bear

a child for Sarai and Abraham. Hagar not only bore a child for Abraham; she was given to him as a wife (16:3). Hagar was Abraham’s concubine even though she was identified simply as a “maidservant” by title.<sup>12</sup> Hagar was not Abraham’s only concubine (25:6); at least one other, Keturah, is named in Genesis 25:1.<sup>13</sup>

An example of applying knowledge of ancient Near Eastern social customs to the interpretation of the biblical text comes from Tremper Longman III, who discusses concubinage among other customs prevalent in the patriarchal narratives and corroborated by the Akkadian literature discovered at Nuzi.<sup>14</sup> After briefly summarizing the plot of Abraham taking Hagar as a concubine, Longman draws parallels between the Genesis account and a story of concubinage presented in the Nuzi literature. He draws the following conclusion about the contribution of this ancient text:

This reference confirms the fact that Abraham utilized a custom that was current during the first half of the second millennium [BC]. By virtue of our knowledge of contemporary customs, we have a clearer idea of what is going through the patriarch’s mind. He refuses at this point to trust the Lord, so he tries to manufacture an heir according to the customs of his day.<sup>15</sup>

Longman’s observation is helpful inasmuch as it adds some historical insight, especially for less seasoned readers of Scripture. The prevalence of concubinage in the ANE makes the actions of Abraham, Sarai, and Hagar less strange. However, Longman does not present this kind of material as simply illuminating the biblical text. In a subtle manner, his discussion of the relationship

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<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew term *šiphâ* is almost always used to describe a female servant, not a concubine. However, in this context it is clear that Hagar’s act of surrogacy and marriage to Abraham was concubinage. This was likely consensual, as Hagar (at least according to Sarai’s report) relished her superior fertility to that of Sarai (Gen. 16:5).

<sup>13</sup> Abraham did not marry Keturah until after Sarai’s death, and Moses referred to her as Abraham’s *iššâ*, “wife.” In later Old Testament literature, the Chronicler referred to Keturah as Abraham’s *pilegeš*, the Hebrew term for “concubine.” This occasions a couple of plausible explanations, including the possibility that Keturah was Abraham’s concubine while Sarai was still living, and she was later elevated to the status of his primary wife.

<sup>14</sup> Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Longman, 97.

between the Nuzi literature and the biblical patriarchal narratives is intended to provide a definitive argument for the Bible's truthfulness. In Longman's mind, because similar history is found in the Nuzi documents, the Bible's history can be trusted. This approach, though, effectively makes the Akkadian Nuzi literature a higher and more esteemed authority, one that is placed *above* the Christian Scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

To return to the central question of this article, is Scripture sufficient to wrestle with the ethical problems of the Genesis 16 narrative, or does one need extrabiblical information to explain its purpose in the larger scope of the biblical storyline? A brief summary demonstrates that placing the text in its canonical context, both in the storyline of Abraham and in the New Testament, provides reliable answers for both the ethical failure of Abraham and the purpose of the text's inclusion. In the case of concubinage, one does not need extensive knowledge of marital practices in the ANE to understand the place of these moral failures in the biblical narrative.

The larger section to which Genesis 16 belongs is the "generations" (*toledoth*) of Terah, introduced in 11:27 and continuing through 25:11. Abraham, Terah's son, is the central figure of this section of Genesis, which serves as a transition from the primeval history to the patriarchal history of God's covenant people, Israel. Abraham and Sarai's decision to take Hagar as a concubine is a response to God's covenantal promise to give Abraham great posterity (Gen 12:2; 15:5) when it seemingly lies in jeopardy. The story of Abraham and Hagar is situated between two affirmations of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 and Genesis 17, in which God says to Abraham, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations" (17:4).

A plain reading of Genesis 16 reveals that Abraham and Sarai were concerned about their childless situation (16:1), and in response they chose to take matters into their own hands, conceiving a child through Hagar (16:3–4). This action reveals faltering faith and conflicts with the marriage ethic of the Bible, in which one man and one woman are to be joined in a covenantal union (Gen 2:21–24). The story in Genesis 16 urges the reader to resist "assisting" God in the accomplishment of his promises, and instead, encourages the reader to look to him and his covenantal promises by faith. There is no demand for the interpreter to propose an alternative reading or an unnecessary justification for Abraham's actions in the text. Furthermore, extrabiblical data about concubinage in the ANE, interesting as it may be, does not make any critical contribution to the explanation of this ethical issue in the narrative.

Paul corroborates this reading of Genesis 16 in his letter to the Galatians, where he proposes an allegorical reading of the text (Gal 4:24) to make contemporary application to the church. In his interpretation of Genesis, Paul suggests that Hagar and her offspring, those "born according to the flesh" (4:23a), are representative of those in Paul's day who interject their own attempts at righteousness into God's covenantal promises. By contrast, Paul suggests that Sarai and her offspring, "born through the promise" (4:23b), are representative of those who are inheritors of God's promises by faith. This interpretation of the Genesis 16 narrative is intended to represent viscerally the foolishness of seeking justification by adherence to the Mosaic Law rather than by faith in Christ (2:16). Man should not seek to actuate God's promises by his own devices (as in Gen 16) but should look trustingly to God, the one who is faithful to his people.

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<sup>16</sup> For scholars who reject the full Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, they situate its composition in the ninth through fifth centuries BC. Such dating systems are highly speculative and usually proposed with at least partial acceptance of Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis. Wellhausen's earliest proposed source, the "Yahwist," is said to have written small kernels of the text of the Pentateuch as early as the tenth century BC. This would put the composition of the earliest written portions of the Pentateuch around five hundred years after Moses's death.

Any attempt to validate or authenticate the biblical text by an outside authority effectively makes that outside authority a *higher* standard. The ethical problems of concubinage are sufficiently addressed in Scripture itself, and a canonical reading of Genesis 16, with an eye toward the New Testament's appropriation of that text (Gal 4:21–31), will guide an interpreter of the Old Testament to a reliable explanation of both the present ethical issue and the purpose of the text's inclusion in the biblical narrative.

### CAN THE OLD TESTAMENT BE UNDERSTOOD APART FROM POLEMICS?

One other trend in Old Testament studies deserves attention in our discussion of the sufficiency and perspicuity of the text. It has been proposed that the Hebrew Scriptures were written not just to speak to Israelite theology but to simultaneously speak *against* the theology of their neighbors, an approach called “polemical theology.”<sup>17</sup> John Currid's brief definition of polemical theology is “the use by biblical writers of the thought forms and stories that were common in the ancient Near Eastern culture, while filling them with radically new meaning.”<sup>18</sup> Currid cites as examples of possible polemics in the Exodus narrative the presence of serpents (Exod 7:8–13) and “the thundering deity” motif.<sup>19</sup>

Currid's work in polemical theology makes helpful observations about some of the most familiar stories in the Old Testament. He pushes back strongly against Peter Enns and John Walton, two scholars who have consistently attempted to present the Old Testament as a religious collection that is strikingly similar to its many peers in the ANE.<sup>20</sup> Currid's response is that the polemical theology of the Old Testament

guides the interpreter to seek the distinctives of Israel's religion and worldview rather than their similarities with their ancient contemporaries.

A polemical reading of the Old Testament makes sense on a theological level. The message of the Hebrew Scriptures directly conflicts with that of Israel's ANE contemporaries. The origins of the cosmos, the character of God, and the interactions between the Creator and his creation are important issues, and the Old Testament necessarily competes with the presentation of these issues found in other ANE literature. It stands to reason, therefore, that the Old Testament speaks in two directions, both *positively* for the truth it contains and *negatively against* the theology and worldview of Israel's contemporaries. Yet a careful balance must be struck between these two facets. Polemical theology runs the risk of overexaggerating the negative aspects of the Old Testament's message and muting the positive aspects. Thus, polemical theology, as it is presented in Currid's work and in the work of other scholars, should not be accepted uncritically.

Scholarship on polemical theology in the Old Testament begs the question: Would the original audience of the Old Testament Scriptures recognize these polemical suggestions? While some proposed polemical angles appear obvious, such as the distinctiveness of the flood narrative in Genesis 6–9, others are far less so. It is reasonable to expect that the Israelites were aware of the deluge stories in the Babylonian *Epic of Atrahasis* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The *Atrahasis* tablets predate Moses's own writing by at least a hundred years, and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, though its extant witnesses are later (seventh century BC), undoubtedly testifies to material that was transmitted orally hundreds of

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<sup>17</sup> See John Currid, *Against the Gods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Currid, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Currid, 28–32.

<sup>20</sup> Enns is best known for his book, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), and Walton for his “Lost World” series, including *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009). Currid directly, albeit briefly, interacts with Enns and Walton in Currid, *Against the Gods*, 23. Enns and Walton both have contributed scholarly work to BioLogos, an organization that seeks to harmonize the creation account in Genesis with an evolutionary paradigm and other ANE creation accounts. See BioLogos, “About Us,” 2022, <https://biologos.org/about-us>.



years earlier. By the time of the fifteenth century BC, the Babylonian flood stories had been orally transmitted for perhaps half a millennium. It is reasonable to expect that the Israelites who received Moses's account of the flood would be able to interpret that story with Babylonian, Canaanite, and even Egyptian parallels in the background. This is unlikely to be the case, however, in many other suggested polemical texts and motifs.

Currid suggests parallels between the birth and miraculous deliverance of Moses and that of Sargon (Akkadian), Horus (Egyptian), and other figures from the ANE. Certain parallels do appear to exist between the origin accounts of these respective heroes, but only when examined in a side-by-side, carefully charted, modern *literary* analysis of written documents. What exactly would the average Israelite, living in a largely preliterate culture, have known of written traditions from Akkad and Egypt?

Raising the question above is important in the discussion of the sufficiency of Scripture because the Old Testament must be perspicuous not only to modern readers *but to its original recipients in antiquity* with their own limitations of knowledge. If a proposed interpretation of a passage is dependent upon first locating parallels in ANE written literature, scrutinizing these carefully on a literary level, and then drawing conclusions about the meaning of a particular phrase/motif/passage on the basis of their divergences, it is doubtful whether Moses's original primitive audience would have been able to undertake such elaborate study. Polemics certainly have a place in the Old Testament and can shed light on certain texts. Nevertheless, the right interpretation of any passage is not dependent on understanding subtle polemical approaches or on the prerequisite knowledge of ANE literary texts.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT IS SUFFICIENT FOR ITS ULTIMATE AIM: THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS CHRIST

This article illustrates a number of ways that questions related to the interpretation of the Old Testament can be resolved without requiring

a resource outside of Scripture itself. When encountering an interpretational difficulty, the reader of the Old Testament should first look to situate that text in its larger context. Understanding how a particular text relates to the literary units around it—from the verse to the sentence to the pericope, and even to the book level and beyond—often yields a fruitful interpretative trajectory. From there the interpreter should look to the definitive interpretation of the New Testament to discover how later inspired authors understood and utilized the Old Testament text in question, whether by direct citation or allusion. If an explicit New Testament citation or allusion cannot be found, then the responsible interpreter should seek to understand how the larger literary unit, within which the difficult text is located, is analyzed in the New Testament.

The suggestion that the Old Testament is sufficient requires asking the question, “Sufficient for *what?*” The definitive answer to this question comes from Jesus, who explicitly identified himself and his work as the goal toward which the Old Testament, in all of its threefold division, would find fulfillment (John 5:46; Luke 24:27, 44). The interpretation of an Old Testament text may be difficult due to ambiguities, ethical dilemmas, or a myriad of other issues. Nevertheless, every text of the Old Testament, even the cumbersome ones, point to Christ. As Scripture's storyline advances through the providential march of history from creation to new creation, it does so only as it finds resolution in the redemptive work of Jesus the Savior. The sufficiency of any Old Testament text should be considered in light of its principal goal of guiding the faithful reader to the person and work of Jesus Christ. •

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# The Sufficiency of Scripture in Systematic Theology

by Owen Strachan

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, much ink has been spilled about the sufficiency of Scripture. Theologians and pastors have widely debated what this doctrine entails. Among some, a line of thought has crystallized: there is a camp of “biblicists” who practice *solo Scriptura*, we hear. This “biblicist” brand of *solo (not sola) Scriptura* means that those of such ilk consult no source but the Bible.<sup>1</sup> They close their ears to the wisdom of Christians from church history. They think themselves ancient in their method, but in truth they are thoroughly modern, approaching the text as if they may simply read it and know it, needing no outside input or help.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas some in the self-professed “classical theism” camp conduct a lively discussion with Catholics, finding deep unity with them in the doctrine of God and other areas, the “biblicists,” so the charge goes, show no such generosity of

spirit.<sup>3</sup> They are antihistorical, fundamentalist, and narrow. The biblicists disdain the broader tradition, foolishly distance themselves from Rome and her faithful teachers, and confine themselves and their churches to a constricted hermeneutical box. Like a bull-headed relief pitcher arrogantly clinging to the mound despite a disastrous ninth inning, the biblicists dismissively wave off the creeds, confessions, and philosophers of the centuries, trusting their own privatized imaginings instead.

## THE ENCROACHMENT OF ROME IN GENEVA

In this hothouse environment, to speak up is no passing flight. These are serious matters of debate, and there are thinkers of considerable depth of thought and learning on both sides. Indeed, different figures in the “classical theism” crowd have made real contributions to Christian faith and practice in numerous regards. Nevertheless, there are different visions of Scripture and tradition

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<sup>1</sup> There is a dangerous sort of “biblicism” that is real, and it is not good in the least. There are people who believe that they should not read anything but the Bible, and that is not in any way what I advocate. Today, though, people who differ even marginally from what is called the “Great Tradition” hermeneutic risk being called a “biblicist” in this derogatory sense. Such name-calling is not grounded in truth and is a real sign of immaturity, unfairness, and lack of charity.

<sup>2</sup> A book that has helped push this imbalanced and uncharitable vision of those who, rightly, confess the doctrine of biblical sufficiency is Christian A. Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Waco, TX: Brazos, 2012). Despite the fact that Smith became a Catholic and—earlier in his career—midwived Critical Race Theory into evangelical and Reformed circles through his coauthored book *Divided by Faith*, his screed against “biblicism” has been accepted as gospel.

<sup>3</sup> To better understand “classical theism” as represented by one prominent voice, see James Dolezal, *All That is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017). For a helpful and remarkably gracious response, see John Frame, “Scholasticism for Evangelicals: Thoughts on *All That Is in God* by James Dolezal,” November 25, 2017, accessible at <https://frame-poythress.org/scholasticism-for-evangelicals-thoughts-on-all-that-is-in-god-by-james-dolezal>.

being promoted in evangelical and Reformed circles today. In our time, the sufficiency of Scripture seems to be receding from view, being subtly replaced by a vision of doctrinal formation that hews much closer to the Catholic hermeneutic.

In the present article, I propose a more suitable and accurate term—“sufficiencist”—to categorize those who confess the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. “Sufficiencist” is my term for what the Protestant Reformers and their evangelical offspring propagated in their theological method as over against the Catholic method. In the Catholic system, with regard to defense and protection of the faith, the creeds and conciliar decisions of the church stand on essentially equal footing with the Bible. Vatican II made this as plain as day:

For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. *Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.*<sup>4</sup>

In functional terms, Rome’s commitment ends up meaning that Scripture speaks truly, but the

church’s tradition speaks with equal weight.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the tradition practically ends up having highest authority, for it authoritatively and unerringly *interprets* the Bible. Strangely, we who are Protestant are being urged by professing evangelicals to adopt a similar hermeneutic. We are told emphatically that we must read the Bible only as “the Church” has read the Bible.

We are told that a theological approach akin to Rome’s method will guard against evil “biblicism” as mentioned above. Popular evangelical podcasts host one Catholic theologian after another; in our seminaries, students read Catholic theology and are exhorted to embrace the Catholic method; in many contexts, we are encouraged to listen to Rome’s teachers, who—we are told—are better teachers than some of our most learned, distinguished, and faithful evangelical systematic theologians. In this climate, Rome infiltrates Geneva (to use shorthand for Catholics and Protestants) inch by inch, foot by foot, with few seeming to notice this encroachment.<sup>6</sup>

But Rome and Geneva do not agree. As D. A. Carson has noted, there is an ongoing divide between Catholics and Protestants over whether “Scripture alone is the sole locus of absolute authority in the church.”<sup>7</sup> The conflict is real and irreconcilable. This is because the Roman position yields a fundamentally different vision of authority and sufficiency than the Reformational vision. The Protestant Reformers recovered the biblical doctrine called the sufficiency of Scripture. In simple form, this doctrine entails that Scripture and Scripture alone provides what we need for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3). There is nothing on

<sup>4</sup> *Verbum Dei* II.9 (page 3), November 18, 1965, accessible online at <https://files.ecatholic.com/5520/documents/2016/10/Dei%20Verbum.pdf?t=1475780775000>. Emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> For a representative voice here, see esteemed Catholic theologian Avery Dulles: “The capacity of popes and councils to teach matters of faith with final authority holds a place among those truths that the church irreversibly teaches as having been revealed by God.” Dulles, “Catholic Doctrine: Between Revelation and Theology,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 54 (1999): 83–91, accessible online at <https://ejournals.bc.edu>.

<sup>6</sup> We should love Catholics. We should seek their eternal good. We can even be thankful, in common grace terms, for different dimensions of their public platform and cultural engagement. But because Catholicism does not confess scriptural sufficiency, we cannot embrace a murky synthesis of Rome and Geneva. Instead, we must break with Rome.

<sup>7</sup> D. A. Carson, *Collected Writings on Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 61n17.

par with Scripture, nothing above Scripture, and nothing outside of Scripture that norms Scripture (lest that source have the same character of Scripture, whether formally or informally).<sup>8</sup>

In this article, I will show that biblically sound systematic theology—doctrine that is pleasing to God—depends upon the sufficiency of Scripture. Scripture alone (1) provides the data of doctrine, (2) determines the method for understanding doctrine, and (3) forms the actual doctrine we confess. Such an approach, as we shall see, does not in any way amount to *solo Scriptura*. Instead, this method represents *sola Scriptura*, with the Bible having normative and ultimate authority in the church and in the life of the Christian, even as we happily glean wisdom from various secondary, less-authoritative sources.

As I hope to show in these embattled days, being a “sufficientist” is not an ignoble end; it is, as empowered by the Spirit, an enchanted calling.<sup>9</sup>

### THREE KEY AFFIRMATIONS OF SCRIPTURAL SUFFICIENCY FOR SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

**First, the sufficiency of Scripture provides the core data of Systematic Theology: Holy Scripture.** For systematians, the word of God is our food. The word of God is our delight (Ps 119:174). The word of God gives us the ready-made data that is our consuming passion and our surpassing preoccupation. The word of God is sufficient, Peter writes, to provide us with everything we need for “life” and “godliness,” *zoe* and *eusebia* (2 Pet 1:3). Everything needed for Christian doctrine is in Scripture. Everything needed for

Christian fidelity is in Scripture. Everything God wanted to say to us is in Scripture. Everything we need to hear from God is in Scripture. There is nothing we are missing from the word of God for Christian faithfulness. There is nothing that needs to be taken away from Scripture; likewise, there is nothing, truly nothing, that needs to be added to Scripture. In sum, Scripture gives us the material for our theological task.

Accordingly, everything needed for redemption is found in Scripture. John Frame elegantly connects the sufficiency of Scripture with the finished work of Christ: “After that redemption, then, evidently, there is nothing more that could contribute anything to our spiritual life and godliness.” Frame calls the unveiling of Christ, essentially, “particular sufficiency,” and concretizes the connection between redemption and sufficiency: “God himself will not add to the work of Christ, and so we should not expect him to add to the message of Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

We do well to note at this point that it is *only* Scripture that gives us the *revealed* Jesus Christ. It is not that we find more of Christ in the Bible than other books or sources; no, it is that we cannot find the true Christ anywhere but in the Bible. We find not only the discrete person of Christ in the Bible but also the definitive doctrine of Christ in the Bible. John Murray said it well:

It is only in and through Scripture that we have any knowledge of or contact with him who is the image of the invisible God. Without Scripture we are excluded completely from the knowledge, faith, and fellowship of him who is the effulgence of the Father’s glory and

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<sup>8</sup> Too often, we confess this doctrine, but do not line out what it entails. For a highly instructive tutorial here, see John Frame, *On Theology: Explorations and Controversies* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2023), 3–131. Frame has taken serious heat for a theological position that exemplifies *sola Scriptura*, but his reflections and wisdom speak a better word than his detractors and chart a sound pathway for rising theologians and pastors.

<sup>9</sup> The term “sufficientist” should not, please note, be identified with the term “fundamentalist.” While I necessarily honor many fundamentalists for their dogged defense of Scripture and even today happily stand shoulder to shoulder with them on the solid rock of God’s word, I am not a fundamentalist, never have been a fundamentalist, and have an approach to culture and broader engagement that differs notably from fundamentalism. In historical terms, the neo-evangelicals got some things wrong on their own count, but their emphasis on positive biblical doctrine, their (imperfect) effort to engage the world with grace and truth, and their avoidance of legalism all deserve commendation and emulation. For context, see Owen Strachan, *Awakening the Evangelical Mind: An Intellectual History of the Neo-Evangelical Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 624–25.

the transcript of his being, as destitute of the Word of life as the disciples would have been if Jesus had not disclosed himself through his spoken word.<sup>11</sup>

Murray's statement reminds us that just as Jesus's teaching was itself sufficient in his day, so the finished word of God given through Jesus and his apostles is sufficient for us in our day.

History and philosophy are surely witnesses that we call to the stand in our doctrinal formation. This we confess without hesitation and with thankfulness to God. But the word of God is the consuming preoccupation of the God-called systematic theologian. The word of God represents and supplies the essential data of the task of systematic theology. The word of God, put more simply, is what we study. It is why we exist, vocationally. The contents of the word of God do not merely signify the starting point of our intellectual inquiry; the contents of the word of God are the surpassing burden of our intellectual inquiry. The data of Scripture—the 66 books, in all their varied texture and rough-hewn elegance and dramatic heft—call for our study, our spiritual preoccupation, and in disciplinary terms, our ability to synthesize and systematize.

In all this, we labor in awe and reverence and wonder. Said biblically, we study in the “fear of God” which is the beginning (not the end) of wisdom per Proverbs 1:7. We are not those who have found it acceptable to submit Scripture to

tests based in naked reason and proofs fashioned to curry to unregenerate counsel. Rather, we are those who have been humbled by divine mercy, with our eyes opened to the foolishness of our own thinking and our minds enlightened to the explosive excellency of the word of God. We fear God as we study, meaning that we approach God in a believing spirit of awe, reverence, and wonder.

This frees us at the outset from the trap of scholasticizing the celestial.<sup>12</sup> The chief end of our inquiry is God, and God is not a being whom we can master. God is beyond us and beyond us to an infinite degree. God is the Creator; we are just creatures. We do not conduct systematic theology, then, as if we can pull down the heavens by the raw power of our intellect. We can do no such thing. We can speak *of* God, and even *for* God through faithful proclamation. But we never do so in a proud demeanor, as if we have mastered the unmasterable. We always do so in a spirit of deep humility, aware that even as we speak logically and intelligently about God, we are dealing with divinity itself. We study the infinite one. Theology is not a subject we conquer; it is a subject at which we tremble, in reverent awe and worshipful wonder (Phil 2:12). The word of God and the theology therein is our subject.

**Second, the sufficiency of Scripture shapes the core method of Systematic Theology: redemptive canonicity.** It should be clear by now that the Bible provides the data for our task of doing systematic theology. The Bible divinely reveals the things of

<sup>11</sup> John Murray, “Finality and Sufficiency of Scripture” in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 1: The Claims of Truth* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2015), 19, 21.

<sup>12</sup> If we embrace this commitment, we will free ourselves from a burden we cannot relieve. We will also avoid many unhealthy and deeply damaging controversies. Where Scripture does not speak, we may well formulate a proposal by which to instruct and help the church. But we will always do so with real care and deep humility. This is needful on a good many subjects that today are in grave danger of being scholasticized and treated as if there is only one acceptable position. These include but are not limited to how the two natures of Christ interact in his life and ministry, how precisely the Spirit empowers the Christ who has all the resources of divinity in his person, how the Father's commissioning of the Son relates to a formal covenant, and how the will of Jesus (expressed in Gethsemane, for example) engages the will of the Father. It is right and good to formulate proposals on such matters, and even to advocate for them, but we must do so with charity and much humility. Even where we cite creeds and gifted thinkers, we must never forget that only Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16). This is not a merely mental matter; this truth thoroughly shapes our method and our ministry. It frees us from trying to be God, and it guards us from enforcing an extrabiblical proposal as the only acceptable one. Each of these failings is sinful and deserving of repentance. We who likewise stumble in many ways should stand ready to grant forgiveness along these lines (Matt 18:21–22; Jas 3:2). Systematic theology should not be blood-sport done in a tribalistic spirit; it should be the outworking of devotion to God and his word in a broader community of Christians where God has given gifts to many, not merely us. How we need the Lord to work in this way!

God. We are systematizers of *theology*, after all, not systematizers of philosophy or history. But if the word gives us our material, the word also drives our method. This sounds elementary, but it is quite important. It makes little sense to locate the word as our depository of the divine, and then, to depart from the word in our disciplinary method.

Such departure, sadly, is increasingly common in our day. The actual material of the Bible worked out from Genesis to Revelation is viewed as the province of Old Testament and New Testament scholars, those engaged in the discipline of biblical studies, those who are exegetes and biblical theologians. The canon matters for *those guys*; the unfolding plan of redemption according to its promise-fulfillment scheme (what I am calling “redemptive canonicity”) matters for *them*; the narrative of Scripture matters for *them*. But for systematic theologians, we hear, no such concern must obtain. Today, one can be a systematician but spend the lion’s share of one’s time tracking historical development, working out abstruse questions with philosophical rigor, or even doing exhaustive exegesis of the work of other systematic theologians.<sup>13</sup>

Tracking history, thinking philosophically, and reading one’s peers all have their place. But the systematic theologian is, fundamentally, a student of Scripture. This means that one must not only read Scripture, but one must read Scripture rightly. This in turn means that one’s core method is anchored in redemptive canonicity, in seeing the Bible as a book that unfolds a true story of salvation from judgment by a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God overflowing with love. Whatever one’s

precise object of study, the center of systematic theology—the center of the biblical narrative upon which systematic theology depends—is Jesus Christ, who is promised in the Old Testament and revealed—and exposit—in the New Testament (Luke 24:44–49; John 5:39–47).

Jesus is the interpretive key to Scripture. Said differently, the Scripture itself communicates to us the promise-fulfillment method. This is not a hermeneutical principle outside of Scripture; this overarching framework proceeds from Scripture, and rightly understood, offers both the method and message of the word. The Old Testament promises a Warrior-Savior who will complete the work of redemption (see Gen 3:15). The New Testament introduces us to this figure, a kingly priest who, in an act of atoning love, dies to satisfy the wrath of God on behalf of the elect and ensure that we may stand before the Father possessed of all the active and passive righteousness of Christ (Heb 2:14–18; Rom 3:21–26). As the gospel of God goes out in the era of the New Testament, sinners are saved, and the church is built, even as we are trained amid much suffering to await the return of the king.

As we are at pains to say, then, the Bible is not a loose collection of maxims that one may pluck and apply however one sees fit. The Bible has a shape, a trajectory, a certain momentum, many different authors from vastly different eras, a massive amount of historical particularity and contextual detail, considerable variance of background and genre, and an escalating progression of narrative. All these factors and more matter for the one who would study the Scriptures rightly, cite the Scriptures faithfully, and collate the Scriptures

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<sup>13</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy makes a subtle but potent observation along these lines. He astutely notes, “Mediaeval theology had internalized and subjectivized the gospel to such an extent that the basis of acceptance with God, of justification, was no longer what God did once for all in Christ, but what God was continuing to do in the life of the Christian. This *de-historicizing* of what God had done once and for all in the gospel went hand-in-hand with the *allegorizing* of the history of the Old Testament. The Reformation recovered the historical Christ-event (the gospel) as the basis of our salvation and, in turn, the objective importance of Old Testament history.” Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom in The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (1981; repr., Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003), 18. Emphasis in original. As we move away from a redemptive hermeneutic in our interpretation and embrace suspect hermeneutical models like allegorizing and *lectio divina* (i.e., communing with Scripture rather than interpreting Scripture), we will surely move away from the biblical gospel. Opening ourselves up to medieval methods will open us up—subtly and over time—to medieval doctrines, including the false gospel of semi-Pelagianism.

systematically.<sup>14</sup> On a similar theme, that of a “redemptive-historical” perspective, Dennis Johnson rightly says the following:

Reading and preaching the Bible redemptive historically is more than drawing lines to connect Old Testament types in “Promise Column A” with New Testament antitypes in “Fulfillment Column B.” It is recognizing that Adam’s, Abraham’s, and Israel’s entire experience *was designed from the beginning to foreshadow the end*, and that ancient believers experienced true but limited foretastes of sweet grace because in the fullness of the times, Jesus, the beloved Son, would keep the covenant and bear the curse on their behalf and ours.<sup>15</sup>

Such a perspective has great importance for systematic theologians. After all, we work in the Bible, primarily. And the Bible is not without a trajectory, a narrative, and a driving heartbeat: Christ. This means that faithful systematic theology should always be conducted in close proximity to Jesus. In some way, systematians are always striving to reveal and point to the greatness of the Savior appointed by the Father and empowered by the Spirit.

The best systematic theology will not, therefore, be a concatenation of isolated quotations squeezed into freeze-dried test-tubes, philosophical proofs strained out by the local logic-chopping engine, or historical reflections fed to us from the theologians of Rome (or any tradition). The best systematic theology will indeed be dependent upon numerous scriptural texts; it will be logical, in terms of being non-contradictory; it will be historically supple, engaging the historic church and her insights.

But above all, the best systematic theology will be *biblical*. That is, it will honor, derive from, and relate to the unfolding true story of God told by God himself in the Bible.

**Third, the sufficiency of Scripture frames the core conclusions of Systematic Theology: biblical doctrine.** Scriptural sufficiency should yield scriptural doctrine. In confessing this reality, we do not suggest that we ourselves interpret or apply the word unerringly. Even with a mind redeemed by the power of divine grace, none of us thinks, reasons, or communicates perfectly. The Bible is perfect. We are not. God speaks inerrantly. We do not.

But praise God, we are enabled by the Spirit to study the word, know the word, learn the word, meditate on the word, drink in the word, enjoy the word, and be ministered to by the word. We are able to read the data of Scripture, to understand it in its book context, to understand it in its genre context, to understand it in its canonical context, to understand in its systematized context, and to understand its import for ethics and the Christian life. As stated throughout, we bring texts together with other texts, systematize the teaching of the whole counsel of God, and are thus able to speak of discrete biblical doctrine.

All this doctrine is hammered out from the word of God. Only the word that is God-breathed, *theopneustos* (2 Tim 3:16), can bind and loose in principal terms. Warfield captures the divine nature, and therefore unique norming power, of Scripture: “When Paul declares, then, that ‘every Scripture,’ or ‘all Scripture’ is the product of the divine breath, he asserts with as much energy as

<sup>14</sup> At this point, we affirm that hermeneutics is not a quasi-mystical art detached from any standard. Instead, faithful principles of biblical interpretation emerge from the biblical text itself and constitute a sound method. While leaving room for interpretive insight and applicatory wisdom from a given pastor or theologian, we have been given a definite program for biblical exegesis. Though few know about it today, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (1982) is a good guide for our work in the text. (Note that this statement is different from the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy published in 1978.) The reader may access this important statement on biblically guided hermeneutical principles at <https://defendinginerrancy.com/chicago-statements>; for context, see <https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI.shtml>. We would do well to re-engage with this statement in our time.

<sup>15</sup> Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 17. Emphasis added.

he could employ that Scripture is the product of a specifically divine operation.”<sup>16</sup> This does not merely signal that Scripture has a unique origin, but that Scripture has unique authority. Because it has unique authority, Scripture alone is sufficient for forming Christian doctrine. No other source is *theopneustos*, and so, no other source is sufficient.

Many other sources and voices can speak into our doctrinal and spiritual formation; we welcome such investment. We do our doctrinal formation, of course, in lively conversation with the historic church. We learn from the creeds and confessions, consulting them for wisdom, grateful to God for faithful witnesses of the past who influence our own faith and practice. In philosophical terms, we track good arguments from thoughtful thinkers, gleaned the ability to reason from their efforts at the same. But in all our study, these voices—like those of fellow theologians and pastors we trust—have an influencing role, not an absolute role. At risk of speaking simply, only the word of God is the word of God. Nothing else is. Nothing else can be. Nothing else will be.

On a historical note, it is right for us to honor two millennia of church history. Yet we should in no way confine ourselves restrictively to emulating the exegesis of one period of the church, whether ancient or medieval. No such mandate is found in the Bible, and any theologians today who call for such a limited historical method seem to miss the irony embedded in the fact that they themselves are publishing theological works in the present age, the twenty-first century, thus unwittingly finding *themselves* in the dreaded category of “modern theology.” It is far more balanced and sensible to harvest truth from the historical church (ancient, medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation)

and to profit richly from the insights of the church of the last two hundred years as well. There simply is no line in the sand that should be observed here, and any who would urge such an iron stricture on us today—in their own *modern* theological works (!)—seem to miss the fact that their pronouncements violate their own rule.

Not only does the Bible possess a qualitatively unique authority, over against that of any outside historical or philosophical source; only Scripture can rightly interpret itself. Writing on the self-attestation of Scripture, J. I. Packer gave eloquent voice to the way the Scripture rightly interprets Scripture:

[E]vangelicals affirm that the Scriptures are *clear*, and interpret themselves from within, and consequently, in their character as 'God's word written' ... are able to stand above both the Church and the Christian in corrective judgment and health-giving instruction. With this goes the conviction that the ministry of the Spirit as the Church's teacher is precisely to cause the Scriptures to fulfil this ministry toward the Church, and so to reform it, and its traditions, according to the biblical pattern. It is also held that the ministry of the Spirit as interpreter guarantees that no Christian who uses the appointed means of grace for understanding the Bible (including worship and instruction, both formal and informal, in the Church—there is no atomic individualism here) can fail to learn all that he needs to know for his spiritual welfare. Not that the Christian or the Church will ever know everything that Scripture contains, or solve all biblical problems, while here on earth; the point is simply that God's people will always know enough to lead them to heaven, starting from where they are.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Biblical Idea of Inspiration” in Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. John J. Hughes (1948; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2023), 72.

<sup>17</sup> J. I. Packer, “Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority,” *Themelios* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), accessible online at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/hermeneutics-and-biblical-authority-2>. Emphasis in original.

This article is one of the best ever written on biblical authority, and it has major implications for the doctrine of biblical sufficiency.



These words from Packer may sound strange to some in this age. If he published such eloquent doctrinal reflection in our time, he would no doubt be accused of insular “biblicism” (despite his rightful warning against “atomic individualism”). Yet what Packer confesses is exactly right and a core commitment of the Reformation tradition: the Spirit is the key interpreter of the word, and the Spirit leads us to measure Scripture by Scripture, making sense of a given text “from within.”

The Spirit’s role in method is foundational. This does not mean that one may handle the word however one sees fit and call it “Spirit-directed”; we are all familiar with that errant practice. It does mean that the Spirit enables us to see what the Scripture plainly is: the word of God. This entails that what Scripture teaches as sound doctrine, we teach as sound doctrine. We do not make up doctrine; we do not develop doctrine;<sup>18</sup> to the contrary, we *receive* doctrine from the Bible, and we articulate it as best we can. No other source contributes to our doctrinal formation; this role is reserved only for the authoritative and sufficient Scripture.

## TOWARD HEAVEN AND SAFE HARBOR

Writing decades ago, luminary theologian Carl F. H. Henry made this disturbing observation: “Theologians and seminarians now often study biblical texts not as authoritative Scripture but simply as texts per se, as historical sources based on still other historical sources, or as texts used to discern the mind of the writer or his ancient readers.” Henry put a fine point on this troubling development by noting: “This approach has become increasingly common as theological institutions have become unsure about the Bible as the norm or rule of faith and practice.”<sup>19</sup>

Henry wrote prophetically. Indeed, as we have noted, the theological academy has drifted further

from the safe harbor of biblical authority and sufficiency. The Bible is less and less treated as *the* norm, and more and more treated like one of several norming influences, even if it ostensibly has pride of place. Many have become functionally “unsure” about biblical authority and sufficiency.

But there is hope—great and surging hope. If preachers and teachers stand on Scripture, we will protect the sheep, and watch as they thrive. Not for us is the wide acclaim of the ecumenical movement. Not for us is the ability to move fluidly between Rome and Geneva. We will not gain applause from the academic guild or the sophisticated elites for being inclusive and broad-minded. In fact, we will be denounced for standing on the word of God, and for daring to speak the truth in love about biblical doctrine. But we do not lose heart.

Rather, we take heart in God (2 Cor 4:16). What looks small today will one day soon look very large indeed. We will soon gather with all the faithful of God in a world of love. We will stand in a great hall of faith, a cosmic throne-room in which the glory of God dazzles all the blood-bought church, and we will worship the Lamb. On that day, we will not regret standing for the sufficiency of Scripture and working in our vocations—including that of systematic theology—to harvest the riches of this doctrine. On that day, we will worship the Christ who is made known to all the world in Scripture alone. Then, we will see just how sufficient the word and the gospel were to get us all the way home. •

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<sup>18</sup> *Contra Verbum Dei* II.8 (page 3), November 18, 1965, accessible online at <https://files.ecatholic.com/5520/documents/2016/10/Dei%20Verbum.pdf?t=1475780775000>.

<sup>19</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority, Volume Four: God Who Speaks and Shows—Fifteen Theses, Part Three* (1979; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 18.

# The Sufficiency of Scripture in Apologetics

by James R. White

## INTRODUCTION

**D**ecades ago, I began my apologetics classes in seminary by playing portions of a debate between a globally known, non-Reformed, “evidentialist” apologist and a well-known atheist in a major Christian context. The conclusion of the Christian’s argument was that “the preponderance of evidence points to the greater possibility of the existence of a god.”<sup>1</sup> I would then play a classic debate from a presuppositional apologist who openly used Scripture and pointed to it as the ultimate authority as he concluded, “Without the Christian God you cannot prove anything.”<sup>2</sup>

As I would discuss the contrast in the two approaches and arguments, another reality would come up. The evidentialist would often back away from defending a fully “biblical” position on numerous topics, preferring a much more flexible philosophical position. The presuppositionalist was straightforward about his starting place and its sufficiency to function in that manner. The contrast was clear and educational.

There are few areas of Christian encounter where the temptation more readily exists to abandon the sufficiency of Scripture, at least on the functional

level, than in the area of apologetics. Faced with secular skepticism about the supernatural and a firmly implanted worldview of unbelief, starting with the idea that God has spoken clearly in the Bible seems like an obvious disaster in the making.

The major temptation to abandon scriptural sufficiency is found in having an improper view of apologetics. It is not our place to change hearts or minds. It is our place to testify, witness, and persuade, but only with the tools that we have been given. When we adopt a man-centered foundation to apologetics, we will grasp for anything to “get the sale.” The result is seen all around us today. But as one of my former fellow elders used to say, “What you win them *with* is what you win them *to*.” If you bring converts in thinking they need an authority *in addition to* Scripture, it will be very hard to convince them otherwise once they are “in” the church.

In this article we will look first at two key texts in Scripture. (Starting elsewhere would be a tacit denial of our own thesis.) These will provide the proper foundation for answering many of the objections to the idea of the sufficiency of Scripture in the work of apologetics.

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<sup>1</sup> William Lane Craig versus Frank Zindler, “Atheism vs. Christianity: Which Way Does the Evidence Point?,” debate moderated by Lee Strobel, Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, IL, June 27, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen versus Gordon S. Stein, “The Great Debate: Does God Exist?,” debate moderated by David Hagopian, University of California—Irvine, Irvine, CA, February 11, 1985.

## PAUL'S FAREWELL TO THE EPHESIAN ELDERS

One of the most touching yet important historical events narrated in Scripture is overlooked by most. It is Paul's final words to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:24–32 (see vv. 17–38 for the entire pericope). Paul gives parting words to men among whom he had labored for three years, teaching, exhorting, and grounding them in truth. It seems Paul believed a strong church in Ephesus would naturally lead to the evangelization of Asia Minor. So, he labored long and hard and now, at the time of his departure, he speaks with deep love and emotion, and yet with deep commitment to his calling. Here are his words:

(24) But I do not consider my life of any importance nor precious to myself, so that I may finish my race and the ministry entrusted to me by the Lord Jesus, specifically, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

(25) And now, behold, I know that all of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will no longer see my face. (26) Therefore, I testify to you all on this day that I am innocent of the blood of all. (27) For I did not shrink back from declaring to you the entire counsel of God. (28) Pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock among whom the Holy Spirit has set you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he preserved with his own blood. (29) I know that after my departure, savage wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock, (30) and from among your very selves men will arise speaking perverse things to lead away the disciples after them. (31) Therefore, be alert, remembering that night and day for three years, I did not cease to admonish each one with tears! (32) And now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.<sup>3</sup>

There is a tremendous amount of practical and vital theology present in Paul's words, but we must focus upon its relevance to apologetics. To do that we must start with verse 24, for it lays out the key task Paul understood he had been charged with: "to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God." Paul is recounting and summing up his entire ministry in Ephesus. In our modern context, apologetics has often been disconnected from gospel proclamation. We may speak of a "defense of the faith," but without the core of the faith intact, that being the "gospel of the grace of God," we are left defending nothing but sets of propositions *that lack any heart-changing and life-giving power.*

Apologetics, if it is to have the approbation of the apostle Paul, must be focused upon the task to which we have been committed—proclamation of the evangel. So central is this reality to Paul's thought that he could say, almost in passing, to the Philippians, that they were partners with him "in the defense and confirmation of the gospel" (Phil 1:7), and that this calling is, in fact, a grace from God. Evangelism was at the heart of Paul's labors, whether in Ephesus or Philippi or beyond.

First and foremost, when I speak of the sufficiency of Scripture in apologetics, I am speaking of apologetics that is gospel-centered, gospel-oriented, and gospel-defined. I am not talking about a defense of "bare theism," nor am I referring to a philosophical system intended to impress the mind but not to change the heart. And this is exactly why, in most contexts today, you would not find apologists or theologians affirming scriptural sufficiency in this realm, for they are not even allowing Scripture to define apologetics at the outset. Apologetics divorced from the gospel of the grace of God is often destructive, divisive, and downright dangerous for those doing it, and those exposed to it as well.

<sup>3</sup> The present translation of Acts 20:24–32 is the author's own.

In Acts 20:26 Paul claims he is innocent (lit. “clean”) of the blood of all. But why? Because he did not edit the gospel of grace. He did not hold anything back. He proclaimed “the entire counsel” of God to the Ephesians (v. 27), even those parts he knew could be offensive. Here again we find modern apologetics often wanting. For many of the most well-known names, the game is “minimization.” The aim is often to make the target the opponent has to shoot at as small as possible. Affirm only the bare necessities. While such a strategy is an effective debate tactic, it does not fit with the calling of Christian apologetics. We are accountable for the entire counsel of God, not just the snippets we can defend with our most recently devised “gotcha” arguments. So, apologetics requires gospel proclamation, but also whole-divine-counsel declaration.

Next, apologetics is a church-based activity. Acts 20:28, addressed to elders, speaks of the need to “shepherd the church of God” because of the danger that is plainly present: savage wolves, we are told, are always lurking (even from within), “not sparing the flock.” One of the qualifications of the elder is to be able to “refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). This defense of the flock is directly related to the defense of the faith by Paul, for he says that these savage wolves will “speak perverse things” (Acts 20:30) to draw away the disciples after themselves. The only way to “shepherd” the sheep in this context is to be able to refute these “perverse things,” and that requires the ability to explain and present the opposite of that which is perverse: that which is straight, clear, truthful, and consistent. Apologists who are not intimately connected to the flock are not only dangerous; they are themselves in danger of becoming victims of the savage wolves.

The elders are exhorted to “be alert” (v. 31) in light of Paul’s lengthy ministry among them and the danger they face from the savage wolves. But it is just here that we have to consider the situation they, and Paul, faced. We have two thousand years of church history behind us. We have the shoulders of giants upon which to stand, both to learn from

their successes as well as their failures. This was the infant church facing increasing hostility, and soon, the persecution of the entire Roman Empire. What chance did this tiny flock have? When we consider the forces that would soon be arrayed against the faithful, how could anyone have had any positive hope for the future?

So, it is just here that we must ask, “Given the dire challenges coming in the future (Gnosticism, for example), surely it is here that Paul will direct the infant church to some kind of bulwark, some kind of overwhelmingly solid rock of defense as he leaves his beloved Ephesian elders, isn’t there?” “Here,” one might remark, “is where Paul must pronounce” something like:

“Follow Peter and his successors in Rome! They will give you infallible guidance!”

“Follow the bishops that will arise in the apostolic sees and the traditions that will develop half a millennium from now, for they will give you guidance!”

“Look to a prophet who will arise in the future to give you new Scriptures and guidance (good luck ‘til then)!”

“Look to the great philosophers of Greece to provide you the arguments you need to defend the sheep (even if the sheep have no earthly idea what their arguments mean)!”

So, with the great challenges coming against the infant church, what does Paul actually say?

“And now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” (v. 32)

While we can fully admit that “word of his grace” is not a full identification of Scripture as a whole, it is likewise obvious that for Paul it is the content of the gospel that is the central reality of Scripture, for this is the same language we will

see when we look at his words to Timothy. In Second Timothy, Paul tells his pastoral protégé that the Scriptures “are able to make you wise unto salvation” (2 Tim 3:15), and here in Acts, that word is able to “give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). In both instances, the *ability* of the phrase to “build up and give” (v. 32) and to “make you wise unto salvation” (2 Tim 3:15) is the key in Paul’s thought. The young church is committed to God and his purposes and to the word of his grace which is powerful and able to build up even that which the world is seeking to tear down.

It truly takes a divinely granted faith to believe that being committed to “God and the word of his grace” will be enough. If we do not have the proper understanding of God’s ultimate purpose in this creation (which is not the exaltation of man’s wisdom, but instead the salvation of those who by faith believe in God’s promises), we will continue to look for sources and defenses that come from human minds and appeal to human desires.

### PAUL’S EXHORTATION TO TIMOTHY

Despite unbelieving accusations often made that Paul did not pen these words to Timothy,<sup>4</sup> the exhortation of the soon-to-be martyr to the young minister has served as a keystone of Christian theology from the first century AD onward. Commonly ignored and overlaid with later tradition, these words provide clear insight into the will of God for the church today. The fact that they come as a “final message” from the elderly Paul to his beloved son in the faith, Timothy, only makes them more important, more poignant. One does not fill one’s last communication to a cherished child with nonsense or unimportant chatter. These words are weighted with importance for the young man to read and to treasure:

(14) But you continue in the things you learned and became convinced of, knowing from whom you learned them, (15) and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. (16) All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, (17) so that the man of God may be fully equipped, thoroughly prepared for every good work.<sup>5</sup>

There are many important parallels between this text and Paul’s final words to the Ephesian elders, which is hardly surprising. In both instances, Paul has predicted difficult times and challenges ahead. In both instances, there is a sense of finality in that he never expects to see the Ephesians again, and in Timothy’s case, he knows his end is near. In both instances, Paul is writing to individuals who have been entrusted with the care of the sheep and the defense of the faith.

After laying out the sufferings and persecutions to come, informing Timothy that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12), Paul turns to Timothy personally, exhorting him to remain steadfast and to “continue in the things you learned and became convinced of” (v. 14). Steadfastness is the call for the Christian minister, not innovation. Consistency is the hallmark of truth. Timothy had been given the great gift of a solid upbringing and had the inestimable advantage of having “known the sacred Scriptures” from his childhood (v. 15). In this passage we have, no doubt, a direct reference to the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people, the Tanakh.<sup>6</sup> And the form of the Jewish Scriptures most familiar to Timothy probably would have been the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX).

<sup>4</sup> There is a proper sense in which the great work of conservative Christian scholars demonstrating the circularity of attacks upon Pauline authorship is a part of the proper apologetic task.

<sup>5</sup> The present translation of 2 Timothy 3:15–17 is the author’s own.

<sup>6</sup> “Tanakh,” or “T-N-K,” is a useful abbreviation of the first letter of each of the three major sections of what we call the “Old Testament,” or the Hebrew Scriptures, namely, the Torah (Law), the Neviim (Prophets), and the Ketuvim (Writings).

These “Scriptures” (v. 15; cf. “the word of his grace” in Acts 20:32) have power, ability, and capacity. They are “able to make you wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15). The commitment of the early church to the *sufficiency* of the Tanakh to ground the Christian proclamation of the gospel should cause all modern readers to ask themselves, “If the early Christians could demonstrate who Jesus was and why he died from the Hebrew Scriptures, can I do the same thing?” It is a serious and important challenge!

The apostle Paul, possibly because he had just mentioned the capacity and ability of Scripture, goes on to state a foundational truth reflected in Jesus’s own handling of the Scriptures: “All Scripture is God-breathed.”<sup>7</sup> We do not have the space to go into a full discussion of all that this term means, but what is certain is that the reason the Scriptures are able to make one wise, and the reason they are able to fully equip the man of God (v. 17), flows from their *nature* as God-breathed revelation.

Because they have a supernatural nature, the Scriptures are profitable for all the tasks to which Timothy is now directed. As an elder in the church, he must teach the faith to the flock. Because of the reality of sin and the fallenness of this world, he must give reproof and correction when the need arises (and it always does). He must provide training in righteousness, the regular application of the truths and principles Christ taught his

apostles to the everyday life of believers, both rich and poor, great and small. And for all these tasks, Timothy is directed not outside the Christian faith to worldly wisdom or philosophy, but to the God-breathed Scriptures.

Paul’s own interpretation of his words is summed up in the purpose clause that is found in verse 17. The God-breathed nature of Scripture provides the man of God what he needs to fulfill his ministry in the church *so that* the man of God may be “fully equipped, thoroughly prepared for every good work.” The two terms Paul uses, “equipped” (*artios*) and “prepared” (*exartizō*), complement and fill each other out. Both speak of completeness and sufficiency. Timothy is not left wondering where to turn for the substance and power of his ministry; he is to continue to trust in the holy writings, the Scriptures.<sup>8</sup>

Just as many today struggle to accept Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 1–2 regarding the foolishness of the gospel message being the power of God over against the wisdom of the world, so too, Paul’s teaching here finds a small audience in the halls of academia. Do we really believe that the God-breathed Scriptures are capable of fully equipping and thoroughly preparing the man of God for *every* good work? How is that possible? This is truly where the dispute lies, for many, even those who work as apologists, struggle to see how ancient Scriptures can fulfill such a challenging

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<sup>7</sup> A number of attempts have been made to come up with a different understanding of the *hapax legomenon* (i.e., a one-time-only word used in the NT) employed in verse 16, *theopneustos*. B. B. Warfield wrote a monumental work on the topic over a century ago, emphasizing the reality that the term directs us away from the Latinized concept of “breathing into,” as in the word *inspiration*, and toward the origin, source, and nature of Scripture as God’s breath, God’s speaking, as in the word *expiration*. B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1948), esp. 283–84. However, recently John C. Poirier has written *The Invention of the Inspired Text: Philological Windows on the Theopneustia of Scripture* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2021). Poirier advocates for what he calls the “vivificationist meaning,” that is, that Scripture’s primary quality referred to in 2 Timothy 3:16 is not that it is “God-breathed” but “life-giving.” Of course, if Scripture is breathed out by God, we can see how it would be life-giving, but the question is what Paul intended to communicate in his original context. And it is just here that we have to realize that Poirier does not believe Paul wrote these words. Many in the New Testament academy consider 2 Timothy a second-century forgery, written by disciples of Paul at best. We cannot underestimate the impact this single consideration has on the evaluation of semantic domains and historical usage (such as data drawn from the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* databases). By rejecting apostolic authorship, external sources become primary in defining the term for authors like Poirier, rather than the term’s consistent relationship to Pauline teaching and to the apostolic message.

<sup>8</sup> We can only pause briefly to recognize that at this point in time, Timothy would have almost none of the writings that we now call the “New Testament,” though the idea of that revelation would not be strange to him in light of Paul’s teachings. Some have attempted to short-circuit this text by arguing that if the current state of canonical revelation at this point was “sufficient,” then there would be no need for all the New Testament books in addition to the Jewish Scriptures. But this misses the apostle’s point: it is the *nature* of revelation that is sufficient because it is God’s purpose that the Scriptures be the repository of his revelation for his church. The current state of that revelation at this point in history is not an objection.

call of equipping and preparation. This once again leads us back to recognize that the purpose of apologetics, along with its relationship to the proclamation of the gospel of God's grace, is central to our inquiry.

### THE REAL PROBLEM TODAY

The New Testament presents us with a primitive church facing a large, vast world of hostility and objection yet with confidence and faith. How? This small band of believers literally turned the world upside down, but they did not do so by marching out of Galilee with a band of philosopher kings at the head. Instead, they brought a message about a crucified Jewish Messiah—a message certain to bring mockery, ridicule, and from many, revulsion. But they showed amazing confidence in the *power* of that message, and the *source* from which it was derived. In other words, they trusted the Spirit of God to work when the gospel was proclaimed. They openly eschewed “words of human wisdom” (1 Cor 2:13) and embraced the “foolishness of God,” knowing it to be stronger and greater than worldly wisdom.

But does this mean that we are left unable to engage the world's objections, or to answer their questions? Surely not. Paul engaged in public debate both in synagogue (Acts 17:17a) and street corner (Acts 17:17b), as did others. But they never forgot the reality that they were dealing with men and women created in God's image. This was the connection, the common place. The apostles did not seek neutral ground, nor did they allow God's Scriptures to be made just one set of religious texts amongst many.

Jesus's little band of disciples did not have social media; they had no internet. Books were published, but slowly, and distribution, in comparison to today, was small. We surely face a new set of complications in our modern world, and perhaps that is why so many run into the apologetic fray without seriously recognizing how quickly and easily they abandon a commitment to Scriptural sufficiency. Indeed, many are simply *embarrassed* by major elements of the biblical record (e.g., creation, flood, judgment, miracles),

and hence, they do everything in their power to *minimize* the role the Bible plays in their defense of the faith. The thinking is, “Once we get them converted, we can worry about the problems of the Bible.” But then we are left wondering “post-conversion” why we have so many who refuse to submit to biblical norms and standards. As a faithful man once said, “What you win them *with* is what you win them *to*.”

The real question is not, “Is the Bible sufficient for apologetics?” but instead, “What kind of apologetics does the Bible direct us to use so as to most powerfully and consistently proclaim the gospel of God's grace?” Those who do not seek to find consistency throughout the length and breadth of their theology will not even consider such a question. Apologetics, if it is thought of at all, will be a question of pragmatics or “what works.” Utilitarianism rules the day in much of the Protestant church in general, and an apologetic system “that works for me” will rarely be the one that consistently balances the testimony of Scripture to the nature of God, the fallenness of man, and the necessity of divine revelation. Instead, systems that appeal to man's pride, or man's emotions, will predominate, since they “work,” at least in the short term.

### BUT WHAT OF THE HANDMAID?

Philosophy has often been identified as the “handmaid of theology.” That phrase intends to convey the idea that philosophy is a useful tool to illustrate, exemplify, and clarify the theological task. It is a means, we are told, to help “translate” the gospel message into different cultures and thought patterns. And, we are assured, there is no danger in the handmaid becoming the “power behind the throne.”

But the reality is that the Scriptures warn, repeatedly, of the danger of human philosophy (Col 2:8). The fallen state of man means there is a constant, unending temptation to elevate man's systems above God's revelation. Good men may start out only seeking to clarify and communicate but, in the end, create a monster that devours everything else in its path as it demands our full

submission and acceptance. It is natural for man to exalt his own wisdom and insight at the expense of humble submission to God's "foolishness" (1 Cor 1:20-21, 25).

There are certain minds that are attracted, almost irresistibly, to sophisticated argumentation and reasoning. Mental puzzles and linguistic gymnastics cause most of us to lose interest quickly, but for others they can become an addiction. Just throw in a quick "all truth is God's truth" line, and they are off to the races. These are the minds that find patient submission to God's ways of gospel proclamation, and to the defense of the faith, to be almost intolerable.

"We must answer every possible objection in the language of the objectors!" we are told, ignoring the fact that Jesus surely did not respond apologetically in such a fashion, nor did the apostles. We do not ever find the writers of the New Testament teaching us that there is a supernatural power in human reasoning and arguments. But they do say without apology that the message of the gospel, the divine word, is able to "work" and accomplish God's purposes (1 Thess 2:13).

Patiently trusting in God's ultimate purposes, in the work of the Spirit over time, runs counter to our modern mindset. We want instant results. Trusting in the tools given to us (let alone recognizing that it is not always God's intention to bring someone to faith at any given moment) requires patience and confidence.

Are the Scriptures sufficient for the apologetic endeavor? The answer is a resounding "yes" as long as we define "apologetic endeavor" in a consistently biblical manner. As long as apologetics is subsumed under, and practiced under, the broader biblical category of the proclamation of the gospel of God's grace, we affirm, without hesitation, the sufficiency of Scripture in that work. •

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# The Sufficiency of Scripture in Preaching

by Rob Davis

*“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”*

(2 Timothy 4:2)<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

“Preach the word.” Could it be simpler? Could it be more direct? “Preach the word.” It was the apostle Paul’s directive in his own day to his “true child in the faith” (1 Tim 1:1), and it remains the directive to us today. It is important to note that Paul does not say, “Preach the culture,” “Preach your opinions,” “Preach politics,” or even “Preach facts about God.” Timothy’s task is to preach the God-breathed Scriptures (2 Tim 3:16; 4:2).

Perhaps surprisingly, Paul does not exhort his protégé, Timothy, to preach only to the faithful and obedient. Paul emphatically tells this young pastor that the word is to be preached even to those who “will not endure sound teaching,” those who have “itching ears,” and those who “will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Tim 4:3). Preaching the word of God is how we nurture the flock of God, to be sure, but it is also how we confront those who poisonously reject the truth. Scripture is sufficient for this task.

It is one thing to *confess* the mighty Reformation doctrine of Scripture’s sufficiency; it is quite another to put it consistently into *practice*. There is an ever-present temptation in ministry to turn to other methods to set the trajectory for growth and discipleship in the church.<sup>2</sup> Preacher, will you make a healthy self-evaluation of your own preaching? If you hold to the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture, does this doctrine reach down to the marrow of your sermons? Is this doctrine evident in every aspect of your preaching, or is it mere lip service, a confession that pragmatically keeps you in the graces of Protestant or Reformed circles but functionally has little bearing on your pulpit ministry?

My purpose in this article is to demonstrate and defend the proposition that Scripture is sufficient for preaching. After first defining basic terms, I will demonstrate and defend Scripture’s sufficiency for (1) preparing sermons, (2) preaching sermons, and (3) practicing sermons.

## DEFINING TERMS

### ***Sufficiency of Scripture***

The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (2LBCF) opens by asserting: “The Holy Scripture

<sup>1</sup> All biblical references in this article are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> A prime example is the strategy employed by the Global Leadership Network (formerly Willow Creek Association), which aims to synthesize “ministry and marketplace expertise.” This network looks to business growth models, sociological metrics, and motivational speakers in the secular world to chart an innovative course for churches. See Global Leadership Network, “Our Story: Leadership with a Higher Purpose,” <https://globalleadership.org/our-story/>.

is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience” (1:1). It details sufficiency in the following declaration: “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men” (1:6). Both statements cite 2 Timothy 3:15–17 as a biblical proof-text. In that text, Paul writes, “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 competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17).

John Calvin highlights the centrality of Scripture for salvation and for the Christian life. He asserts: “Now, in order that true religion may shine upon us, we ought to hold that it must take its beginning from heavenly doctrine and that no one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, John Owen writes: “[Scripture] is *sufficient* unto the end whereunto it is designed; that is, sufficient to ingenerate, cherish, increase, and preserve faith, and love, and reverence, with holy obedience, in them, in such a way and manner as will assuredly bring them unto the end of all supernatural revelation in the *enjoyment* of God.”<sup>4</sup>

Though “sufficient” in our English language means “enough to meet the needs of a situation or a proposed end,”<sup>5</sup> the claim of Scripture’s sufficiency asserts that it is the *only* authority to accomplish the purposes of saving faith and godliness. Rather than existing as one among many adequate authorities, the Bible is the only adequate authority to reveal everything necessary for salvation and for a life that pleases God. Scripture’s

sufficiency is the foundation for the formal principle of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*.

### **Preaching**

Chapter 1 of the Second Helvetic Confession (AD 1536) in the Swiss-Reformed tradition claims: “The preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God” (emphasis added). Paul confidently affirms this principle in his First Letter to the Thessalonians: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13). Lest anyone object by pointing out that Paul was an apostle, a special eye-and-ear witness of the risen Lord, and thus, unique in his authority (“Of course *his* preaching was the word of God!”), the reality is that Jesus sent out non-apostles, “the seventy” in Luke 10:1–16, and he ends his commission to them by declaring, “The one who hears you hears me” (v. 16). Make no mistake, the preacher who faithfully proclaims the biblical message acts as a mouthpiece of God.

Jonathan Griffiths provides a sound definition of preaching: “The New Testament makes it clear that preachers act as God’s heralds who proclaim his word on his behalf. When authentic, faithful Christian preaching of the biblical word takes place, *that preaching constitutes a true proclamation of the word of God that enables God’s own voice to be heard*.”<sup>6</sup> Preaching is a high and holy calling in which men stand before people and speak the word of God to them. Because we speak God’s word, God’s breathed-out Scripture must be the content of what we preach (2 Tim 3:16; 4:2). According to Griffiths, New Testament preaching is marked by four defining characteristics: “(a) It is a proclamation of God’s word, and especially the gospel of Jesus Christ; (b) It is carried out by recognized leaders with a commission to preach; (c)

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 1.6.2 (1:72).

<sup>4</sup> John Owen, *Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word, with Assurances Therein in The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (1678; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 4:196. Emphasis in original.

<sup>5</sup> *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam, 1977), 1164.

<sup>6</sup> Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament*, 122. Emphasis in original.

It is an authoritative proclamation; (d) It is carried out in a public context.”<sup>7</sup>

## SCRIPTURE IS SUFFICIENT FOR PREPARING SERMONS

### *The Messenger*

Sadly, the first step of many men as they prepare to preach is to consult commentaries. Others pipe podcasts of sermons into their ears, and still others jump immediately into the text, whether in English or in the original languages. These are substandard ways to begin sermon preparation. Paul exhorts Timothy to have a different starting place: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16). Keeping a close watch on our lives must precede even the beginning of formal preparation for preaching.

In a sermon on 1 Timothy 4:16, Robert Trail warns:

Take heed unto thyself, that thou be a lively thriving Christian. See that all thy religion run not in the channel of thy employment. It is found by experience, that as it fares with a minister in the frame of his heart, and thriving of the work of God in his soul, so doth it fare with his ministry both in its vigour and effects. A carnal frame, a dead heart, and a loose walk, makes cold and unprofitable preaching. And how common is it for ministers to neglect their own vineyard? When we read the word, we read it as ministers, to know what we should teach, rather than [chiefly] what we should learn as Christians.”<sup>8</sup>

The first need in sermon preparation is recognizing our inadequacy and confessing our utter dependence upon God’s grace. Our Lord modeled

this dependence on his heavenly Father when he routinely broke away from his earthly ministry to spend time in prayer (Mark 1:35). We must not think of ourselves as more self-sufficient than Jesus. Again, Trail makes this idea clear:

Ministers should pray much for themselves; for they have corruptions like other men, and have temptations that none but ministers are assaulted with. They should pray for their message. How sweet and easy is it for a minister (and lively it is to be the more profitable to the people), to bring forth that Scripture as food to the souls of his people, that he hath got opened to his own heart by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the exercise of faith and love in prayer! A minister should pray for a blessing on the word; and he should be much in seeking God particularly for the people.... [T]his may be the reason why some ministers of meaner gifts and parts are more successful, than some that are far above them in abilities; not because they preach better, so much as because they pray more. Many good sermons are lost for lack of much prayer in study.<sup>9</sup>

Preacher, you must train yourself for godliness by practicing spiritual disciplines. Devour the word so your mind is transformed (Rom 12:2), pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17), rejoice and give thanks (1 Thess 5:16, 18).<sup>10</sup> As Paul urges Timothy, “Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Tim 4:7b–8). Your consistent work to crucify sin and pursue Christ will keep your heart and mind fit to prepare sermons. Begin your sermon preparation in prayer, confessing your inadequacy and dependence upon the Holy Spirit’s enlightenment. Scripture not only provides the

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (London: Apollos; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 120.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Trail, “By What Means May Ministers Best Win Souls?” in *The Works of Robert Trail* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust), 1:219.

<sup>9</sup> Trail, *Works*, 1:223.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the spiritual disciplines, see Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991, rev. 2014); David Mathis, *Habits of Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Patrick Morley, *A Man’s Guide to the Spiritual Disciplines: 12 Habits to Strengthen Your Walk with Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 2007).

material for preaching soul-stirring sermons; it also gives us the method for how to prepare.

### **The Message**

Just as we must precede our formal preparation for preaching in accordance with the Scriptures—which tell us to pray and cultivate a thriving relationship with God—we must begin crafting our sermons according to the Scriptures. First and foremost, we must marinate in the biblical text. The apostle Peter tells us that the word of God is “living and abiding” (1 Pet 1:23). So, too, echoes the author of Hebrews: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). If the Bible possesses active and abundant life, why would we begin our study anywhere else?

We must also devote ourselves to the study of God’s word by using Scripture to interpret Scripture. Charles Hodge helps us see the importance of this method (often called “the analogy of faith”):

If the Scriptures be what they claim to be, the word of God, they are the work of one mind, and that mind divine. From this it follows that Scripture cannot contradict Scripture. God cannot teach in one place anything which is inconsistent with what he teaches in another. Hence Scripture must explain Scripture. If a passage admits of different interpretations, that only can be the true one which agrees with what the Bible teaches elsewhere on the same subject.<sup>11</sup>

Scripture is the content of our preaching. So, too, is Scripture the measuring stick for all Christian doctrine and ethics that flow from its pages.

At this point, however, we come to a crossroads. If Scripture is sufficient for preparing a sermon, must

Scripture be *all* that we use as we equip ourselves to preach the sermon? Is there something amiss about using other resources in our preparation? God is not against books written by men. Luke endeavored to compile for Theophilus an accurate and orderly account of what he saw—in doing so, he read and used some non-inspired accounts (Luke 1:1–4). God has given teachers and preachers as gifts to the church (Eph 4:11), and they can produce helpful books and resources for the church that are not on par with Scripture.<sup>12</sup> We are blessed more than any preceding generation with resources to help us study the Scriptures. Use them, preacher, but not as the *primary* source of your study. Never form a dependence on the work of others or a habit of reading the words of men before the God-breathed word. You’ve been given the best teacher, the Holy Spirit, and the best text, the living word!

When you preach, be sure that your hearers can tell that you have spent time with God. Teach them by your life that your boast is not in knowing the wisdom of men, but in knowing and understanding God himself (Jer 9:23–25; 1 Cor 1:18–31). Author Greg R. Allison, summarizing John Calvin’s view of the sufficiency of Scripture in opposition to the Roman Catholic dependence on church tradition, writes: “Thus, the Spirit of God carries out his work of teaching only through the Word of God. The church is to learn its beliefs and practices from the Bible, and the Bible alone, without any recourse to apostolic tradition and church decrees. This principle is an application of Scripture’s sufficiency.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Messaged**

We have seen that Scripture is sufficient both for preparing the messenger and for preparing the message. Nevertheless, the members of a congregation have no less need to prepare to *hear* a sermon than the preacher has need to prepare to preach it. Remember the opening statement from the Second Helvetic Confession: “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.” When

<sup>11</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), 187.

<sup>12</sup> The very act of writing and reading this article demonstrates the point that such resources are useful when biblical priority is properly recognized.

<sup>13</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 154.

the preacher faithfully preaches, God speaks to his people, so his people should be prepared and ready to listen.

Preparing to hear a sermon first requires prayer for all the same reasons that a preacher should pray before he begins a sermon. The psalmist writes, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Ps 119:18). The congregation must pray for its ability to spiritually hear. God’s people must pray for everyone who will hear the sermon, including children. The community of faith must pray that God will overcome all distractions. They must pray for the preacher, for the lost to be saved, and for the saved to be sanctified.

After prayer, prospective hearers of the sermon should read and reread the text that will be preached. They should study it, marinate in it, pray through it, memorize it, and discuss it with family and friends. The spiritual benefit received while hearing a sermon is exponentially multiplied by the amount of time spent preparing to hear it.

In addition to all the benefits promised to those who immerse themselves in the word of God, consider the example of those not ready to hear the word. Hours before he was betrayed, Jesus took his disciples to Gethsemane and asked them to stand watch while he went away to pray. Instead, the disciples fell asleep, not once, but three times! “Could you not watch one hour?” Jesus asked. “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt 26:41).

Preachers, encourage your listeners to be well-rested as they prepare to hear God speak to them through a sermon. Exhort them to get a good night’s sleep. Urge them to prepare the night before Sunday worship so that they can be ready the next morning. Encourage moms and dads to set out their kids’ clothing the night before and have a plan to get everyone in the car on time. All of this helps prepare church members to listen to a sermon well.<sup>14</sup>

## SCRIPTURE IS SUFFICIENT FOR PREACHING SERMONS

Because Scripture is sufficient to prepare the messenger, the message, and the one messaged, it is also sufficient for the preaching event. A preacher who believes that Scripture is the only adequate authority to reveal everything necessary for salvation and for godliness will trust Scripture’s sufficiency to accomplish everything needed in a sermon. Remembering this is not an article about how to preach, we now turn to a few of the goals that preaching must accomplish and how dependence on Scripture’s sufficiency accomplishes these goals. Such goals include the “six Es” of preaching: expositing, equipping, encouraging, exhorting, exposing, and evangelizing.

### **Expositing**

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture demands that our preaching be expositional.<sup>15</sup> David Helms defines expository preaching in able fashion: “Expositional preaching is empowered preaching that rightfully submits the shape and

<sup>14</sup> Pastors can also teach their congregations how to prepare to hear sermons by doing activities like writing and distributing study and application questions the week before and providing written guides to help dads lead their families in advance of the worship service. For help preparing for and participating in worship, see Ken Ramey, *Expository Listening: A Handbook for Hearing and Doing God’s Word* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2010); Jay Adams, *Be Careful How You Listen: How to Get the Most out of a Sermon* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2007); Christopher Ash, *Listen Up! A Practical Guide to Listening to Sermons* (Epsom, UK: Good Book Company, 2009); Brian J. Najapfour, *A Hearer of God’s Word: Ten Ways to Listen to Better Sermons* (Dorr, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2019); Joel Beeke, *The Family at Church: Listening to Sermons and Attending Prayer Meetings* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Verse-by-verse preaching through books of the Bible is the most fruitful way to feed a congregation with the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). As we have maintained, Paul taught the sufficiency of Scripture in preaching (2 Tim 3:16–17), but he also practiced what he preached. He declared to the Ephesian elders: “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Topical sermons have their occasional place, but a steady diet of topical sermons allows the preacher and their congregation to avoid difficult texts and limits the sermon topics to whatever the preacher’s wisdom deems necessary. When it is necessary or prudent to preach a topical sermon, the approach to preaching must still be expositing a text of Scripture.

emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of a biblical text.”<sup>16</sup>

Richard Mayhue lists five “minimal elements” that mark expository preaching:

1. The message finds its sole source in Scripture.
2. The message is extracted from Scripture through careful exegesis.
3. The message preparation correctly interprets Scripture in its normal sense and its context.
4. The message clearly explains the original God-intended meaning of Scripture.
5. The message applies the Scriptural meaning for today.<sup>17</sup>

Because the point(s) of the text must be the point(s) of our sermon, we must understand the point(s) the original author made and how that author intended his original audience to respond. We must ask the right questions of the text and let the text give us the answers. We utilize interpretive tools to pull out meaning from the text rather than reading meaning into the text.<sup>18</sup> All our exhortations and applications must flow from our exposition, so we must not exhort or apply the text until we’ve done the work to exposit and explain the text in its original context.

As we preach the sermon, we also teach our hearers how to interpret any text they study. We demonstrate the art and science of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) as we explain the context and meaning of our sermon text. We display our confidence that Scripture is sufficient

for life and godliness and instill in our hearers the same confidence. A great joy in pastoral ministry is to see the people we serve grasp and apply the glorious truth that Scripture is sufficient for family devotions, one-on-one discipleship, small group Bible studies, and personal Bible study. Regular expository preaching consistently demonstrates this glorious reality.

### **Equipping**

Ephesians chapter 4 illuminates the relationship between preaching, equipping, and the sufficiency of Scripture. Paul informs us that Christ gave the church gifts of “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,<sup>19</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11–13).<sup>20</sup> The equipping ministry of pastors and teachers will continue until Christ returns and the church reaches full unity (v. 13a), maturity (v. 13b), and Christlikeness (v. 13c). Described negatively, this unified maturity and Christlikeness will be brought about when pastors and teachers train people to “no longer be children, tossed to and for by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Eph 4:14).

What tool is sufficient to accomplish these purposes? The holy Scriptures. If the church is to avoid becoming gullible and unstable children,

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<sup>16</sup> David Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God’s Word Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Mayhue, “Rediscovering Expository Preaching,” in John MacArthur Jr. and the Master’s Seminary Faculty, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 12–13.

<sup>18</sup> Basic hermeneutical principles include examining the text’s multi-layered context, using Scripture to interpret Scripture, interpreting less-clear texts with clearer texts, finding the structure of the text, examining grammar and syntax, identifying genre and interpreting accordingly, recognizing progressive revelation, identifying Biblical theology, interpreting literally (rather than literalistically), etc.

<sup>19</sup> “Shepherds” translates *poimenas* and in this context may be translated “pastors” (see NASB, LSB, NIV, KJV, NKJV).

<sup>20</sup> The present author takes the view that “pastors and teachers” refer to two related but distinct gifts. In other words, the two nouns are connected in the sense that all pastors are teachers, but not all teachers are pastors. Other scholars combine these two words into one gift of “pastor-teacher” by applying the Granville Sharp rule. However, because the personal nouns are plural, Granville Sharp does not apply. Even so, since one single article (“the”) precedes the nouns “pastors” and “teachers,” scholars in this latter camp still view the two words in tandem as one single category (i.e., pastor-teachers). For a comparable view to that of the present author, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 284.

they must actively engage in “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:14a). Jesus confirmed this reality when he prayed, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). Harold W. Hoehner wisely notes, “Christ gave foundational gifts of the church for the immediate purpose of preparing all the saints for the goal of service and in turn this service is for the final goal of building up the entire body of Christ. As each believer functions with the gift given to each, Christ’s body, the church, will be built up.”<sup>21</sup> When pastors preach God’s word as the only adequate authority to reveal everything necessary for salvation and a life that pleases God, the church is equipped for the work of ministry that leads to building up the body of Christ toward unity, maturity, and Christlikeness.

### **Encouraging and Exhorting**

The author of Hebrews makes the unassailable case that Christ is the Great Melchizedekian High Priest who inaugurates a new and better covenant. He entered the heavenly holy place and made the once-for-all sacrifice that brought forgiveness of sin. Believers now have supreme confidence because of Christ’s work on our behalf. The Scriptures are sufficient to provide the kind of encouragement that helps believers to persevere, and in so doing, to prove they “are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls” (Heb 10:39).

Before he gets to his remarks about perseverance, the author of Hebrews calls Christians to demonstrate tangible expressions of obedience and unity, one of which is: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging (*parakaleō*) one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb 10:24–25).<sup>22</sup> Believers need encouragement, and that need grows daily as God’s plan to sum

up all things in Christ progresses toward Christ’s second coming. We encourage one another as we regularly and faithfully gather together under the preached word. As faithful pastors preach the sufficient Scriptures, we equip our hearers to know the character and commands of God and thereby to understand what “love and good deeds” entail. The encouragement is then multiplied as our hearers apply what they have learned in their families and discipleship relationships.

John the Baptist preached the good news about Jesus by using “many other exhortations” (Luke 3:18). As Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, Luke as narrator tells us, “With many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation’” (Acts 2:40). So, too, Paul uses similar language to describe his ministry among the Thessalonians: “[L]ike a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God” (1 Thess 2:11–12). And when Paul charged Timothy his protégé to “preach the word,” he did so by imploring him to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (1 Tim 4:2). Preaching involves exhorting and encouraging our hearers to obey the truths taught in the passage preached. We make this urgent appeal *from* the Scriptures, *on the basis of* the Scriptures, and expect obedience through the power of the gospel *as revealed in* the Scriptures.

### **Exposing**

The word of God in the ministry of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to expose, reveal, and convict the sinner of his sin. Nothing else can accomplish what God says his word will do. God’s word alone has the power to pierce “to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). This spiritual surgery is what happened when Peter

<sup>21</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 551.

<sup>22</sup> Of the 111 occurrences of the Greek verb *parakaleō*, the ESV translates it as *exhort* (14 times), *encourage* (14 times), and *comfort* (16 times). The verb carries with it the idea of urgency or strong appeal. See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilber Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker [BDAG], 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “*parakaleō*.”

preached on the day of Pentecost: “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). Recounting his early days with the Thessalonians, Paul was confident that they were loved and chosen by God because the gospel “came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess 1:5). The Holy Spirit carries out his saving work only through the word of God, and here we see that the Holy Spirit accompanies the word with full conviction.

The Holy Spirit’s work of conviction through the word is a gift for first-time hearers but also for seasoned believers. One must be brought to a conviction of sin leading to repentance for salvation, but believers must also be marked by regular repentance of sin. Thomas Manton writes of the innumerable benefits afforded to those who are part of the new covenant—and one such benefit is repentance.<sup>23</sup> Believers’ daily lives must be marked by turning from sin and pursuing Christ because the gospel grants us the grace and power to crucify sin.<sup>24</sup> Our preaching must include calls to repentance and promises of the Spirit-enabled gift of repentance and restoration (Jas 4:6–10).

### **Evangelizing**

Not only did God expose the hearts of Peter’s hearers at Pentecost, but he also brought them to a place where they desired salvation: “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). Why did convicted sinners respond to Peter and the apostles in this way? Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, men were pierced to the heart and pleaded for redemption from their sins. After preaching Christ from the Old Testament (Joel 2:28–32, Ps 16:8–11, and Ps 110:1), Peter calls his hearers to respond in faith.

In the First Letter of Peter, the apostle explains the working of God’s word unto salvation in the souls of his hearers by stating: “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God ... And this word is the good news that was preached to you” (1 Pet 1:23, 25). The apostle Paul also affirms the spiritual reality of regeneration or new birth when he writes, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). What brings about such responses? As we have seen, it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit who works through the preached word. From Genesis to Revelation, the word of God reveals his plan to redeem a people for himself through Christ’s perfect life, death, resurrection, and ascension. God made the world’s wisdom foolish, and it is the folly of this message of the cross that God chooses to use for his glory to save those who believe (1 Cor 1:18–21). The Spirit opens the hearts of hearers to embrace this saving message.

### **SCRIPTURE IS SUFFICIENT FOR PRACTICING SERMONS**

Finally, the word of God is sufficient to help our hearers *put into practice* what they have heard. Our preaching includes prompting our hearers toward obedience, but it must also include answering the question, “How do I obey?” Preachers must impress upon their listeners the reality that true obedience which pleases the Lord is always Spirit-empowered obedience. We do not begin the Christian life through the Spirit and then somehow continue the Christian life through human effort and hard work (Gal 3:3). Such an approach would amount to foolishness!

Preachers of the word must equip believers to obey the imperatives of Scripture based on the reality of the indicatives of Scripture. Our exhortation should not merely convey, “Obey God’s commands!” but rather, “Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Manton, *Sermons upon Romans 8*, in *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton* (Homewood, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), 12:104.

<sup>24</sup> See discussion on Romans chapter six below.



The first command Paul gives in the letter to the Romans is based on the reality that we have been set free from sin because of our union with Christ and all he accomplished. The indicative of Romans 6:7—the fact that believers have been set free from sin—fuels obedience to the imperatives of 6:11–12, “so you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God ... [l]et not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.” The call to obedience for believers is always: “Be who you are in Christ because of what Christ has accomplished on your behalf!”

The psalmist celebrates the benefits of God’s word and the way it leads him toward godliness:

Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word. I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. (Ps 119:97–104)

Any positive response to the preached word finds its source of enlightenment and empowerment in the Spirit of God working through the all-sufficient word of God. As Paul recounts, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Cor 2:12).

## CONCLUSION

Scripture is sufficient for the preparation, preaching, and practicing of sermons, so the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture must captivate and drive preachers. The power of our

preaching is not dependent upon our charisma, storytelling abilities, emotional appeals, polished presentation, or any other skill. Though we must be diligent in preparation, and though our deliveries should never bore our hearers, the power behind our preaching and the ability of our hearers to hear depends solely on the Holy Spirit working through the all-sufficient word of God. Preacher, may you humble yourself before the Lord and depend upon the Holy Spirit as you endeavor to feed Christ’s flock with his word, knowing, as did Martin Luther: “I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word ... I did nothing. The Word did it all.”<sup>25</sup> •

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, as cited in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 55.

# The Sufficiency of Scripture in Counseling

by Wayne A. Mack

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

**T**he inerrancy of Scripture and authority of Scripture are like conjoined twins—they are inseparably connected to each other.<sup>2</sup> Holy Scripture, being God’s testimony, is true, and therefore should serve as our standard for all matters of faith and practice (Isa 8:19–20).<sup>3</sup> God’s word, being both truthful (John 17:17) and authoritative, calls us to humble and faithful obedience in every area of which it speaks. There is no authority that is higher than that of Scripture. On whatever subject the Bible speaks about, one must regard its assessment as both inerrant and authoritative.

As a Christian, it is precisely because I affirm the preceding convictions that I also believe in the *sufficiency* of Scripture, and, in particular, its sufficiency in the area of counseling. Scripture is not silent about its own sufficiency for understanding man and his non-physical problems and for resolving those problems. Because Scripture affirms this quality about itself, I, as a creature of the Creator, and more so, as a dedicated follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, must submit to this teaching about scriptural sufficiency. Doing anything less would make me disloyal to my Master.

Many in our day have affirmed the inerrancy and authority of Scripture in matters of faith and practice, but they have not affirmed the sufficiency of Scripture for understanding and resolving the spiritual (non-physical) problems of man. They believe that we need insights of psychology to understand and help people. In essence, they believe that when it comes to treating matters of the soul, the Bible is fundamentally deficient. They believe that God did not design the Bible for this purpose, and so, we must rely on extrabiblical, psychological theories and insights.

For many Christians, the Bible has nominal/professed authority rather than functional/practical authority in the area of counseling. Many acknowledge it to be the word of God, and therefore worthy of our respect, but when it comes to understanding and resolving the real issues of life, they give it limited value.

## A DEFINITION OF CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

***Christian counseling is Christ-centered.*** The attitude that many Christians have toward the Scriptures was vividly illustrated by a person who came to interview me about the kind of

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<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted and abridged with permission from Dr. and Mrs. Wayne A. Mack from an article by the same title published in *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 63–84. The *TMSJ* article was, in turn, adapted from the chapter “What Is Biblical Counseling?” in *Totally Sufficient*, eds. Ed Hinson and Howard Eyrich (Eugene, OR: Harvest House 1997). It is also used by permission of the Managing Editor of *The Master’s Seminary Journal*.

<sup>2</sup> A helpful statement on these matters is the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978).

<sup>3</sup> The New King James Version (NKJV) of the Bible is used for all biblical quotations in this article, unless otherwise noted.

counseling I did. This person was traveling around the United States questioning various Christian counselors about their views on what constitutes “Christian counseling.” In the interview, I said I believed that any counseling worthy of the name “Christian” should be *conscientiously and comprehensively Christ-centered*. Such counseling will make much of who Christ is, what he has done for us in his life and death and resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit, what he is doing for us now in his session at the Father’s right hand, and what he will yet do for us in the future.

In Christian counseling, the Christ of the Bible will not be an appendage, a “tack on” for surviving life in the “fast lane.” He will be the center as well as the circumference of our counseling. Understanding the nature and causes of our human difficulties will include understanding ways in which we are unlike Christ in our values, aspirations, desires, thoughts, feelings, choices, attitudes, actions, responses, and other aspects of our lives. Resolving those sin-related difficulties will include being redeemed and justified through Christ, receiving God’s forgiveness through Christ, and acquiring divine power to replace un-Christlike, sinful patterns of life with Christlike, godly ways of life.

For Christian counseling to occur, the people doing the counseling must be individuals who are conscientiously and comprehensively Christian in their outlook on life. True Christian counseling is done by people who have experienced the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, who have come to Christ in repentance and faith, who have acknowledged him as Lord and Savior of their lives, and who want to live lives of obedience to him. Their main concern in life is to exalt him and bring glory to his name. They believe that because God did not spare his own Son (on the cross) but delivered him up (to death) for us (on

our behalf as a substitute), he will freely give us—through Christ—all that we need for effective and productive living (transforming us into the likeness of his Son). True Christian counseling is done by those whose theological convictions impact, permeate, and control their personal lives and their counseling theory and practice.

***Christian counseling is church-centered.***

A second major distinctive of true Christian counseling that I mentioned to my interviewer was that it should be *conscientiously and comprehensively church-centered*. The Scriptures clearly teach that the local church is the primary means by which God intends to accomplish his work in the world. The local church is his ordained instrument for calling the lost to himself. It is also the context in which he sanctifies and changes his people into the very likeness of Christ. According to Scripture, the church is his household, the pillar and ground of the truth, and it is the instrument he uses in helping his people to put off the old way of life (pre-Christian habit patterns and lifestyles, ways of thinking, feeling, choosing, and acting) and to put on the new self (a new manner of life, Christlike thoughts, feelings, choices, actions, values, and responses—Eph 4:1–32).

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament will lead a person to the conclusion that the church is at the center of God’s program for his people. Jesus Christ, who proclaimed that he would build his church (Matt 16:18), invested authority in it to act with the *imprimatur* of heaven (Matt 18:17–20), and ultimately, he revealed that his plan was to fill the world with local bodies of believers (Matt 28:18–20).

When trying to capture and project his conception of the role of the church in God’s program and with God’s people, John Calvin made the impassioned assertion that “it is always disastrous to leave the church.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (reprint, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 2:1012.

Calvin's words were not specifically directed toward the issue of counseling. His statement does, however, indicate Calvin's perspective on the importance of the church in the lives of believers. His view concurs with the idea that the church is responsible for providing counseling and that Christians are responsible for seeking care and guidance for their personal lives. Calvin's study of the Scriptures convinced him that the nurture, edification, and sanctification of believers was to be church-centered. I wholeheartedly agree with this emphasis because I believe this is the unmistakable teaching of Holy Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

**Christian counseling is Bible-based.** As I continued to explain my views on Christian counseling, I told my interviewer that a third major distinctive of true Christian counseling was that it should be *conscientiously and comprehensively Bible-based*. It should derive from the Bible its understanding of who man is, the nature of man's problems, why man has these problems, and how to resolve them. For counseling to be worthy of the name of Christ, the counselor must be conscientiously and comprehensively committed to the sufficiency of Scripture for understanding and resolving all of the non-physical personal and interpersonal sin-related difficulties of man.

### QUESTIONING THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

At this point, the individual who had come to ask about my views on Christian counseling responded by saying, "Well, what you're saying about all of these things is nice, but what do you think should be done when people have really *serious* problems?"

Now, consider what this person—who claimed to be a Christian—was implying by that question. She was implying that the factors I had mentioned might prove helpful with people who have minor problems, but certainly they are not enough for resolving the really serious problems of life. She

was intimating that the approach I had described was rather simplistic. She was suggesting that the resources that God prescribes in his word for ministering to needy people are not adequate. She was insinuating that the substantial insights necessary for ministering to people with major difficulties must come from sources other than the ones I had mentioned.

Unfortunately, at least from my perspective, her views represent the opinions of many professing Christians. Douglas Bookman, in an article entitled "The Scriptures and Biblical Counseling," describes the way many professing Christians think about the sufficiency of Scripture in counseling:

The persuasion continues—articulated, justified, and applied in various ways—that there is truth that is at least profitable and perhaps even necessary to the counseling effort. This truth is to be discovered beyond the pages of Scripture.... This persuasion lies at the heart of the integrationist impulse of Christian Psychology.... By all accounts, this integrationist tendency is rather recent in origin.... by this last decade of the twentieth century there exists an obvious attitude of reconciliation between Christianity and psychology in many quarters. Indeed, many devotees of Christian psychology evidence a greater measure of fraternity with the secular psychological community than with those Christians who are compelled by their theology to reject the discipline of secular psychotherapy.<sup>6</sup>

Douglas Bookman delineates several ways in which Christians who do not believe in the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling actually do regard and use the Bible in the care of souls: (a) the two-book approach; (b) the no-book approach; and (c) the filtering-device approach.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne Mack and David Swavely, *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Bookman, "The Scriptures and Biblical Counseling," *Introduction to Biblical Counseling*, John F. MacArthur Jr., and Wayne A. Mack, eds. (Dallas: Word, 1994) 63–65.

**The Two-Book Approach.** One approach to the integration issue is called the “two-book” or the “general versus special revelation” approach. The argument that is often used to support this theory is that God reveals truth to us in two primary ways: (a) through truth contained in Scripture; and (b) through truth that exists “out there” in creation that man must learn and discover. The idea is that since all truth is God’s truth, it really does not matter where that truth is found. Those who hold to this view believe that both sources of truth are equally valid. When applied to the area of counseling, the proponents of this approach affirm that “any defensible truth that is derived by means of psychological research into the order of mankind is truth derived from general revelation, thus truth derived from God, and thus truth as dependable and authoritative as truth exegeted from Scripture.”<sup>7</sup>

A representative quote from Harold Ellens, a defender of this two-book view, clearly illustrates the thrust of this position. He asserts:

Theology and Psychology are both sciences in their own right, stand legitimately on their own foundations, [and] read carefully are the two books of God’s Revelation.... Wherever *truth* is disclosed it is always *God’s truth*. Whether it is found in General Revelation or Special Revelation, it is *truth* which has equal warrant with all other *truth*. Some truth may have greater weight than other *truth* in a specific situation, but there is no difference in its warrant as *truth*.<sup>8</sup>

**The No-Book Approach.** Another approach to the integration issue might be called the “no-book” approach, which suggests that we cannot really be sure that our understanding of the Bible is accurate because our interpretive efforts are

always colored by our own perspectives. Bookman explains this approach in this way:

All human knowledge is flawed by definition. There is no reason to be any more suspicious of science than of theology ... simply because Scripture is no less liable to the limitations of human participation than is any other truth source.... [H]uman knowing of truth can only approach greater and greater levels of probability; certainty is propositionally unthinkable.<sup>9</sup>

Though this viewpoint may seem incredulous to most Christians, it is likely to become the dominant view of so-called “Christian counseling” in years to come. This viewpoint already dominates postcritical hermeneutics and will most likely continue to filter down into the arena of pastoral and religious counseling.

**The Filtering-Device Approach.** Some Christians who are not comfortable with either of the previously mentioned perspectives assert that the Bible should be used as a rule book or filtering device for identifying truth found in secular psychology. According to the advocates of this view:

Truth derived from the study of any segment of general revelation, whether psychology or any other field, is not as trustworthy as the truth found in Scriptures. This is the reason that the integrationist will filter psychological truth through biblical truth and will accept only that which is not contradictory to God’s special revelation.<sup>10</sup>

This view is sometimes called “spoiling the Egyptians”—a phrase from Exodus 12:36 used in reference to what the Israelites did when they were delivered from their Egyptian captivity.

<sup>7</sup> Bookman, 63–65.

<sup>8</sup> J. Harold Ellens, “Biblical Themes in Psychological Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 6, no. 2 (1980): 2, as cited in Bookman, “The Scriptures and Biblical Counseling,” 71.

<sup>9</sup> Bookman, “The Scriptures and Biblical Counseling” 90.

<sup>10</sup> William F. English, “An Integrationist’s Critique of and Challenge to the Bobgan’s View of Counseling Psychotherapy,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 18, no. 3 (1990): 229, as cited in Bookman, “The Scriptures and Biblical Counseling,” 91.

This incident is used to illustrate and give biblical warrant to the practice of accepting and benefitting from extrabiblical insights in the realm of counseling theory and practice. The idea is that since the Israelites did not reject the silver and gold that came from ungodly Egyptians (in fact, they were commanded by God to take all of the silver and gold they could get—Exod 3:21–22), we should not reject counseling theories and practices discovered and used by unbelievers.

Though proponents of these three major approaches to Christian counseling differ on some issues, they are all agreed on one major point: the traditional biblical resources for dealing with man's problems are not enough; they simply are not adequate. We must use insights and ideas and techniques that are not taught by nor found in God's word. Bookman and others have written excellent resources that expose the errors of such thinking, and I recommend their writings to you for further illumination and refutation.<sup>11</sup>

## THE SHORTCOMINGS OF EXTRABIBLICAL INSIGHTS

I have three reasons for rejecting the idea that Christian counselors need extrabiblical insights to do truly effective counseling: (1) the limitations of human knowledge; (2) the depravity of human nature; and (3) the sufficiency of Scripture. Each reason will be explored in succession.

**Limitations of Human Knowledge.** The first reason that causes me to deny the need for extrabiblical insights in Christian counseling is related to the finiteness of man's knowledge. The fact that man is finite necessarily limits the extent and validity of his knowledge. Even Adam, the first man, was a finite human being who needed God's revelation for a correct understanding of God,

himself, morals (right versus wrong), truth (facts versus falsehood), and what should be believed versus what should not be believed (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15–17, 24).<sup>12</sup>

An old fable about six blind men who bumped into and felt different parts of the same elephant illustrates the futility of man's attempts to find absolute truth by the usual means of intuition, reason, or empirical research. As the story goes, one man approached the elephant from the front and grasped his trunk and said, "An elephant is like a fire hose." A second blind man happened to touch one of the animals tusks and said, "An elephant is like a thick spear." The third blind man felt the elephant's side and said, "An elephant is like a wall." The fourth blind man approached the elephant from the rear and, gripping its tail, said, "An elephant is like a rope." The fifth man grabbed one of the elephant's legs and said, "An elephant is like the trunk of a tree." The sixth man, who was very tall, grabbed one of the elephant's ears and said, "An elephant is like a fan."

Which of these depictions of an elephant was correct? None of them! Why? Because each of them encountered or experienced only a limited portion of the whole elephant. These blind men's knowledge of what an elephant was like was restricted and even erroneous because of the limitations of their experience and perception. So it is and always must be with finite mortal man when it comes to the matter of discerning absolute truth apart from the revelation of the living God, who knows all things and sees the whole picture clearly and perfectly.

**Depravity of Human Nature.** A second factor that causes me to reject the idea that Christian counselors should welcome and depend on extrabiblical insights and therapies connects to

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<sup>11</sup> Important critiques related to integrationist attempts are found in John F. MacArthur Jr., and Wayne A. Mack, eds., *Introduction to Biblical Counseling*, 63–97; Michael S. Horton, ed., *Power Religion* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), esp. 191–218, 219–43; David Powlison, *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 12, no. 4 (1984): 270–78; Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Jay Adams, *Teaching To Observe* (Woodruff, SC: Timeless Texts, 1995); Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 3–46, 76–90, 167–82.

<sup>12</sup> The first man needed special revelation (God's spoken word) to help him interpret general revelation (the world around him).

the biblical teaching about the depravity of man's nature since the fall of Adam in Genesis 3. Any biblical discussion of how man comes to know truth must include a consideration of what theologians often refer to as the "noetic" effects of sin.<sup>13</sup>

Scripture clearly teaches that sin has affected every aspect of man's being. Man's character, speech, and behavior have all been perverted by sin—as well as his emotions and desires, his conscience and will, his intellect, his thought processes, his goals and motives, and the way he views and interprets life.<sup>14</sup> None of man's faculties have escaped the corrupting, corrosive, perverting, and debilitating impact of sin.

In reference to the cognitive, motivational, and emotional aspects of man's being, Scripture asserts that:

The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jer 17:9)

The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understands ... (Ps 53:2)

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness ... Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever ... And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind. (Rom 1:18, 22, 25, 28)

The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God. (Rom 8:7)

You were formerly alienated and hostile in your mind ... (Col 1:21)

To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their consciences are defiled. (Titus 1:15)

Out of the heart come evil thoughts ... (Matt 15:19)

What does the biblical teaching about the noetic effects of sin have to do with whether or not Christian counselors should accept and use extrabiblical insights in their counseling efforts? The answer to that question is simple: Scripture teaches that the minds of unredeemed men have been adversely affected by sin and, as a result, even if they *observe* something accurately, they are likely to *interpret* it wrongly. Having the kind of mind (including all the cognitive, motivational, and emotional aspects previously mentioned) described in the previous verses, unregenerate men will tend to distort truth. The only way we can think rightly is to allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds so that we will learn to look at, interpret, and understand life through the lens of Scripture (Pss 119:104; 36:9; Isa 8:19, 20; Rom 1:18–32; 12:2; Eph 4:23).

When he commented on the role that secular disciplines should play in biblical counseling, David Powlison vividly describes the noetic impact of sin on man's thinking processes:

Secular disciplines ... explain people, define what people ought to be like, and try to solve people's problems without considering God and man's relationship to God. Secular disciplines have made a systematic commitment to being wrong.... [S]ecular people are often brilliant observers of other human beings. They are often ingenious critics and theoreticians. But they also distort what they see and mislead by what they teach and do, because from God's point of view the wisdom of the world has fundamental folly

<sup>13</sup> The word "noetic" is related to the Greek word *nous*, which in English means "mind."

<sup>14</sup> See Rom 1:18–3:23; 8:8; 1 Kgs 8:46; Pss 14:1–13; 51:5; 58:3; Isa 53:6; 64:6; Eph 2:1–3.

written through it. They will not acknowledge that God has created human beings as God-related and God-accountable creatures. The mind set [*sic*] of secularity is like a power saw with a set that deviates from the right angle. It may be a powerful saw, and it may cut a lot of wood, but every board comes out crooked.<sup>15</sup>

“But,” someone may ask, “what about those statements that finite and sinful men make that seem to be a reiteration of concepts and ideas taught by Scripture? Must we regard these observations as false because the person did not get them from the Bible?” Those questions may be answered in several ways:

1. People may have been influenced by biblical teaching through various means and not even be aware of it, nor do they give the Bible credit for their insights. But even if this occurs, they will always distort Scriptural teaching and put their own spin on it. They may, for example, talk about the importance of “God/god,” prayer, forgiveness, dealing with guilt, taking responsibility, love, confession, or the spiritual dimension in life. On the surface, a person’s teaching on these concepts may seem very biblical, but on further investigation, the theologically savvy, biblically trained person will discover that not every word that sounds the same refers to the same idea. People may use the same words as Scripture, only to fill those words with completely different meanings. Inevitably, the Bible indicates that men will suppress, pervert, devalue, deny, and distort the truth even if it is staring them in the face (Rom 1:18; 1 Cor 2:14).
2. Extrabiblical statements that seem to reflect biblical truth must be regarded as stemming from a false posture or bent

because, as Richard Pratt states, “They are not the result of voluntary obedience to God’s revelation ...”<sup>16</sup>

3. Pratt continues, “Beyond this, the [extrabiblical] statements are falsified by the non-Christian framework of meaning and therefore lead away from the worship of God. If nothing else, the mere commitment to human independence falsifies the non-Christian’s statements.”<sup>17</sup>

**The Sufficiency of Scripture.** My third reason for rejecting the idea that Christian counselors need extrabiblical insights to do effective counseling is that the Bible says God has given us—in our union with Christ and in his word—everything that is necessary for living and for godliness (2 Pet 1:3). Scripture clearly says that it contains all the principles and practical insights that are necessary for understanding people and their problems (as we’ll see in a moment). So, apart from the question of whether it is *possible* to integrate the ideas of man with the truth of God’s word is the issue of whether or not it is *necessary*. On this matter, I am convinced that Scripture’s own testimony about its sufficiency, adequacy, and superiority is abundantly plain.

To demonstrate the biblical accuracy of this third truth, I could cite numerous passages of Scripture, but due to space limitations in this article, I will refer to only one: 2 Peter 1:3–7.

### OUR SUFFICIENCY IN CHRIST

Perhaps there is no better summary of the Bible’s teaching about our complete sufficiency in Christ than the one given by the apostle Peter when he wrote that by his divine power God “has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3). “Life” has to do with everything that we experience on the horizontal plain—in terms of what it takes to live effectively and biblically

<sup>15</sup> David Powlson, “Frequently Asked Questions about Biblical Counseling,” *Introduction to Biblical Counseling* 365–66.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Pratt, *Every Thought Captive* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1979) 17.

<sup>17</sup> Pratt, 17.



in our daily activities and relationships with our environment and other people. “Godliness” has to do with our relationship with God—with living a God-centered, God-conscious life marked by godly character and conduct.

Peter proceeds to define “everything pertaining to life and godliness” as “becom[ing] partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:3–4). It involves being born again or born from above, becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus, receiving from God a new nature with new dispositions, desires, interests, potential, and power, putting on the new self, and being renewed in the image of God (v. 4; John 3:1–8; Rom 6:1–11; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:10; 1 Pet 1:23). It involves the capacity to “escape the corruption that is in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Pet 1:4). It involves developing the qualities of faith, moral excellence, true knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and Christian love (vv. 4–7) so that you might live a useful life for Christ (vv. 8–10).

Life and godliness also involves being able to deal successfully with issues that are present in the lives of people who seek counseling. People who need counseling lack the qualities that Peter mentions in 2 Peter 1:3–7 and need help in developing them. It is interesting to observe that people whose lives reflect these qualities do not need much formal counseling. This passage is pregnant with counseling implications.

Notice that Peter says that God has, by his divine power, “granted to us *everything* pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3). Everything that is needed to acquire this kind of life and qualities (vv. 5–7) and to develop them has been granted to us by God. And how do we tap into these powerful, all-sufficient resources? Peter declared that these divine resources become ours through the true knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord and through the medium of his precious and magnificent promises (vv. 2–4). In other words, the repository of the “everything” we need for life and godliness is found in our glorious and excellent God and in his precious and magnificent word (see 1:19–21).

Our sufficiency in Christ is found in a deeper, fuller, applicatory, life-changing knowledge of the glory and excellence of God and the magnificence and preciousness of his promises. Astoundingly, God has called Christian believers to become partakers or sharers of the divine nature.

## WORTHY OF FULL CONFIDENCE

In light of what we have learned from 2 Pet 1:3–7, it is doubtful that God could have stated more clearly the sufficiency of our resources in Christ and in his word. What more could he have said to get the message through to us that we do not need any extrabiblical resources to understand people and their problems and help them to develop the qualities, attitudes, desires, values, feelings, and behavior that are proper for relating to and living before God in a way that pleases and honors him?

A consideration of the truths presented in this passage and many others (e.g., Ps 19:7–11; 2 Tim 3:15–17) compels me to draw three conclusions:

1. The inerrant Bible to which Christians are committed as an authority in life teaches that God has provided for us in his word whatever is true and necessary for successful living. It declares that God has given us, in the Bible, everything we need for being in right relationship with God, ourselves, and other people.
2. Professing Christians have two options: either they must yield to the Bible’s teaching in this area, or they must abandon the idea that the Bible is inerrant and authoritative. Scripture is either inerrant, authoritative, *and* sufficient, or it is none of these things. If the Bible claims to be sufficient in the ways and for the purposes previously delineated, and it is not, then you cannot say it is inerrant and authoritative. Given what the Bible teaches about itself (self-attestation), you simply cannot have it both ways.
3. Because the Bible asserts its own sufficiency for soul care and counseling-related issues, secular psychology has nothing to offer for

understanding or providing solutions to the non-physical problems of people. When it comes to counseling people, we have no reason for depending on the insights of finite and fallen men. Rather, we have every reason to place our confidence in the sure, dependable, and entirely trustworthy revelation of God given to us in Holy Scripture. That is because the Bible contains a God-ordained, sufficient, comprehensive system of theoretical commitments, principles, insights, goals, and appropriate methods for understanding and resolving the non-physical problems of people. The Bible provides for us a model that needs no supplement. God, the expert on helping people, has given us in Scripture counseling perspectives that are wholly adequate for resolving our sin-related problems.

As a final word of clarification, secular psychology may play an illustrative or a provocative role in its relation to biblical counseling. It may provide examples and details that, when carefully and radically reinterpreted, demonstrate the biblical model (illustrative), or it may challenge us to study the Scriptures more thoroughly to develop our model in areas we have not thought about (provocative). However, because of man's finiteness and fallenness, the insights, methodologies, and practices of secular psychology are in many instances dangerously unbiblical, dishonoring to God, and harmful to people. Other aspects of secular psychology, at best, add nothing, and therefore, they are unnecessary.

None of the illustrations, observations, or details that secular psychologists present are necessary for the task of understanding and helping people. We already have all we need—the authoritative, indispensable, perspicuous, sufficient, and superior revelation of God in his word (Isa 8:19–20)! The Holy Spirit and the God-breathed word are our agents of change. As a result, no consistent Christian should think that we must place our dependence on the extrabiblical theories or practices of men for understanding and promoting change in God's people. •

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SUMMARY CHART:

# THREATS TO THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE



THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINE	SCRIPTURAL SUFFICIENCY IN THE DISCIPLINE (ESV)	EXTERNAL AUTHORITY THAT (ALLEGEDLY) PROVIDES “THE NECESSARY LENS” FOR UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE	EXAMPLE OF A CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENT THAT PROMOTES AN EXTERNAL AUTHORITY
New Testament	<p><b>2 Peter 3:15–16</b>            “... just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters ... which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.”</p>	Second Temple Jewish Literature	New Perspective on Paul (NPP)
Old Testament	<p><b>2 Timothy 3:16–17</b>            “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 competent, equipped for every good work.”</p>	Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) Literature	BioLogos
Systematic Theology	<p><b>Luke 24:44</b>            “Then he [Jesus] said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”</p>	Cappadocian Fathers, Thomas Aquinas, etc.	“Great Tradition” Hermeneutics
Apologetics	<p><b>Acts 20:26–27</b>            “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”</p>	“Neutral” Reasoning & Human Philosophy	Classical Apologetics & Evidentialist Apologetics
Preaching	<p><b>2 Timothy 4:2</b>            “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”</p>	Business Growth Strategies & Sociological Metrics	Global Leadership Network (formerly Willow Creek Association)
Counseling	<p><b>2 Peter 1:3</b>            “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence ...” (see also 1:19–21)</p>	Secular Psychology	Integrated Christian Counseling



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