

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Luther and Calvin on the Authority of the Bible

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All acquainted with the sixteenth century Reformation know that the watchword was *Sola Scriptura*—"Scripture alone." This assertion was made against the pope, the church "fathers," and church councils. Luther and Calvin's "Scripture alone" meant at least four things:

1. the necessity of Scripture;
2. the authority of Scripture;
3. the sufficiency of Scripture; and
4. the perspicuity of Scripture.

The Necessity of Scripture

Negatively, Scripture is necessary because, first, man is a creature, and second, man is a sinner. The blindness and darkness of the human heart, the hold that Satan has over his miserable subjects, and the inability of men to desire truth on their own part make an objective revelation most necessary. Scripture is necessary for the preservation of God's Word for mankind in an objective and self-attesting form. Luther said that among God's people the rule is not to be a smart aleck or a know-it-all, "but to hear, believe and persevere in the Word of God, through which alone we obtain whatever knowledge we have of God and divine things. We are not to

determine out of ourselves what we must believe about him, but to hear and learn it from him."

The Bible is a necessity. *Sola Scriptura* must be seen as both a denial and an affirmation. It is a denial of man's ability to know God as he ought apart from Scripture, and it affirms that the Bible is the only place where definite knowledge of God is to be discovered. Man is wholly bankrupt of that knowledge which is able to save him. If he is desirous of salvation, he must turn to the written Word of Scripture.

Calvin takes great pains to stress that under both the old and new dispensation God committed his Word to writing in order to ensure a correct knowledge of himself apart from any priestly interpretation. When the Reformer speaks of the apostles being authorized to teach what Christ commanded, he says: "Let this be a firm principle: No other word is to be held as the Word of God and given place as such in the Church than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of his Word." Calvin makes it clear that Christ limited the mission of the apostles "when he ordered them to go and teach not what they had thoughtlessly fabricated, but all that he had commanded them." Without the Bible we have no revelation from God which is able to save us from sin and death. *Sola Scriptura* means the *necessity* of Scripture.

The Authority of Scripture

The authority of the Bible is implicit in its necessity. The Scriptures are necessary because an authoritative self-revelation of God is necessary for men. However, we need to distinguish between authority and necessity. Martin Luther's contemporaries admitted the necessity of the Bible, but it was his insistence upon its authority which brought them into serious conflict with the Reformer. Luther's *sola Scriptura* was revolutionary because it attributed to the Bible *absolute authority*—over pope, "fathers," and councils. The offensive concept was *sola Scriptura*—Scripture *alone*. Luther was not content with belief in the relative necessity of Scripture. For him the Bible was the only authority:

In the empire of the church the ruler is God's Word.

We must judge according to the Word of God.

We must judge and consider all wonders and miracles in the light of God's Word, to ascertain whether they are in accordance and agreement with it.

Whether in opposition to Rome or the enthusiasts, Luther never tired of asserting Scripture *alone*.

Likewise, Calvin would not tolerate the subjection of the Word to human authorities. The mark of the church—indeed the *sine qua non* of the true church—was the rule of the Word. Calvin declares: "Since the church is Christ's Kingdom, and he reigns by his Word alone, will it not be clear to any man that those are lying words by which the Kingdom of Christ is imagined to exist apart from his sceptre (that is, his most holy Word)?"

Both Reformers were all too aware that sinful man seeks to be autonomous. He seeks to set himself up as a judge over that which presents itself to him as revelation. The Word of God does not come to man in such a way as to recognize his self-claimed autonomy. Rather, it comes challenging his authority and overthrowing his conceited attempt to have the final word. Calvin saw as blasphemous impiety the attempt to maintain the precedence and priority of the church over the Word. As Paul

declares, the church is founded on the doctrine of the apostles and prophets. We must not speak as though the mother owed her birth to the daughter. Calvin understood that to reject the rule of the Word was to reject the very rule of Christ himself.

Modern views on authority do not echo the sentiments of Luther and Calvin. Yet interestingly enough, many of these views are anticipated in the defense of truth made by these two sons of Paul. As previously stated, some today wish to speak of Christ being the final authority while they reject the authority of the Word. However, Calvin sees the authoritative reign of Christ in and through, not apart from, the Word. So also with those who would claim direct governance by the Spirit. Governance by the Spirit without or instead of the Word would be too vague and unstable. Christ has joined the Spirit to the Word to avoid such a vague, unstable government. Word and Spirit belong together—inseparably together.

Those who wish to propound a multiple source concept of authority would do well to hearken to the *sola* of Luther. He, like Calvin, repudiated the notion that the Scriptures are created by the church and not vice versa:

The Church is built on the word of the Gospel which is the Word of God's wisdom and virtue.

The Word of God preserves the Church of God.

Indeed, the church owes her existence to the Word and is maintained by the same means. Nor would Luther be patient with the argument by the sophists, who deduced the superiority of the church over the Word because of the supposed creation of the canon by the church. The inimitable response of Luther cannot go unquoted:

What a splendid argument! I approve Scripture. Therefore I am superior to Scripture. John the Baptist acknowledges and confesses Christ. He points to him with his finger. Therefore he is superior to Christ. The church approves Christian

faith and doctrine. Therefore the church is superior to them.

Surely no more needs to be added. For Luther and Calvin, *sola Scriptura* meant the absolute authority of the Bible. Their position is but the reflection of Paul's and ought, therefore, to be ours.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

We come now to the sufficiency of Scripture. Once again, this attribute is involved inextricably with the previous two. The notions of man are not partly but wholly bankrupt. There is need for no additional ideas from man to supplement the divine revelation. The necessity of the Bible has reference to all men; the authority of the Bible has particular reference to the autonomous pretensions of Rome and the fanatics; and the sufficiency of the Word challenged the attempted supplements of the philosophers and Romanists.

Sola Scriptura was the denial of any admixture of the word of man with the Word of God. The Holy Spirit is present in the revelation of the Word. Any teaching that does not agree with Scripture is to be rejected, Luther said, "even if it snows miracles every day." Luther did not despise the creeds of the church, but accepted them simply because they had Biblical content. Fidelity to the Word was the criterion for Luther, not only for the creeds of the church but for the theologians also. Though he, like Calvin, appealed time and again to the early theologians, he would not bow to them when their teachings conflicted with that of Scripture. Declared the Reformer: "I will not listen to the church or the fathers or the apostles unless they bring and teach the pure Word of God." The Scriptures are sufficient. In so far as theologians help us to understand those Scriptures, Luther was happy to appeal to them. However, he never had any notion that Scripture had to be supplemented.

A Council has no power to establish new articles of faith, even though the Holy Spirit is present. Even the apostolic council in Jerusalem introduced nothing new in matters of faith . . .

A council has the power—and is also duty-bound to exercise it—to suppress and condemn new articles of faith in accordance with Scripture and the ancient faith . . .

Calvin takes the same position when he speaks as follows:

Furthermore, those who, having forsaken Scripture, imagine some way or other of reaching God, ought to be thought of as not so much gripped by error as carried away by frenzy. For of late, certain giddy men have arisen who, with great haughtiness, exacting the teaching office of the Holy Spirit, despise all reading and laugh at the simplicity of those who, as they express it, still follow the dead and killing letter.

These fanatics, who appealed to the Spirit instead of the Word, showed contempt for that Word. They denied the all-sufficiency and perfection of the Word. However, the Spirit is recognized in his agreement with Scripture, for the Word and Spirit belong *inseparably* together.

Today many claim authority for charismatic experiences and others posit authority in some philosophy or psychology other than the Word. It needs to be stated again that the Word is sufficient. It needs no supplementation from popes, theologians, councils, or bureaucracies. It needs no supplementation by enthusiastic fanatics who entertain their own private revelations and visions. It needs no supplementation by scientists, psychologists, or philosophers. The Scripture is sufficient.

The Perspicuity of Scripture

We have considered the necessity, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture. Now we come to the perspicuity, or the essential clarity, of the Bible. If necessity is aimed at rationalism, authority at Romanism and fanaticism, and sufficiency at eclecticism, then the perspicuity of the Scriptures is aimed at clericalism and professorialism. Rome confined the Word to ecclesiastical experts. Luther

and Calvin broke the chains that held the Bible to the scholars' bench and gave the Word of God to the humblest peasant. In his comment on *Psalm 37*, Luther said: "There is not on Earth a book more lucidly written than the Holy Scripture; compared with all other books it is as the sun compared with all other lights." Luther accused the papacy of beclouding the inherent radiance of the Word and keeping the people from its unambiguous truth. He objected: "they take from the Scripture its single, simple, and stable meaning; they blind our eyes, so that we stagger about and retain no reliable interpretation. We are like men bewitched or tricked while they play with us as gamblers with their dice."

Erasmus was no better. He erred greatly in Luther's eyes in asserting that, apart from "the precepts designed to regulate our existence," the Bible is, in many places, obscure and impenetrable. In his *Bondage of the Will*, Luther complains: "It is with such scarecrows that Satan has frightened away men from reading the Sacred Writings and has rendered the Holy Scriptures contemptible . . ."

It must not be thought that the perspicuity of Scripture is inconsistent with the Protestant emphasis of the diligent exposition of the Word. Notice these pertinent remarks of Calvin:

Since we ought to be satisfied with the Word of God alone, what purpose is served by hearing sermons every day, or even the office of pastors? Has not every person the opportunity of reading the Bible? But Paul assigns to teachers the duty of dividing or cutting, as if a father in giving food to his children, were dividing the bread and cutting it in small pieces.

The minister of the Word must strive to be a scholar. Declares Calvin: "None will ever be a good minister of the Word of God, unless he is first of all a scholar." It is as if Calvin were speaking of our day when he says: "how many [ministers] does one see who have only superficially glanced at Holy Scripture and are so pitifully poorly versed in it that with every new idea they change their views." Further, not only must the perspicuity of Scripture

not lead us into academic indifference, but it must not lead us to think that, unaided by the Spirit, we can fathom the true intent of God's Word. Finally, in reference to the perspicuity of Scripture, it must not be thought that the total clarity and comprehensibility of the Word are here being advocated. The perspicuity of Scripture refers to the basic or essential clarity. There are things in the Word that the best of God's children have not been able to fathom. However, by the gracious ministry of the Spirit, that which is necessary for salvation and godliness is clear.

The Reformers' Approach to the Bible

Generally speaking, contemporary theology posits supreme authority in some sort of god and gives the Bible only a relative authority. Contemporary theology bluntly refuses to give absolute authority to the Bible, for it claims to fear that to do so is to rob God of his absolute authority. But we have seen that, for Luther and Calvin, *sola Scriptura* meant nothing less than the absolute authority of the Bible. Both Reformers saw the Scriptures as deserving the attribute of absolute authority—not in the place of God but as the expression of the very mind of God. Hence, Luther and Calvin call the modern church back to the absolute authority of the infallible Bible as the Word of God in the church and the world.

If contemporary theology posits supreme authority in a god to the detriment of the Bible, present day "evangelicalism" posits supreme authority in the experience of the worshiper to the detriment of the Word. Luther and Calvin constantly fought against Rome's pretensions to direct contact with the Spirit in and through the pope and church councils. Rome admitted that the Spirit spoke in and through the Bible, but claimed this was not the *final* locus of the Spirit's working. As pointed out earlier, Luther attacked the right of councils to establish new articles of faith. In addition, Luther and Calvin had to defend the absolute authority of the Bible against the fanatics, who boasted of immediacy of revelation by the Spirit.

Today, the miraculous, the unusual, the pragmatically "helpful" govern the approach of many to the Word so that what they find is only the confirmation of their experiences. The slogan, "The man with an experience is never at the mercy of the man with an argument," is highly dangerous and anti-Christian. A miracle, a "changed life," may be used as the final "proof" which closes all argument and brings down charges of resisting the Spirit upon those who wish to exercise reserve. But if a position is not in accordance with the Bible, it is wrong—irrespective of experience. Luther insisted that that which does not agree with Scripture is to be rejected "even if it snows miracles every day."

Luther and Calvin challenge both contemporary theology and "evangelicalism" in their practical demonstration of commitment to the authority of Scripture. Witness the truly prodigious labors of these Reformers in expounding the Word in preaching, teaching, and voluminous writings. This provides a stark contrast to most theology and preaching today. The Bible is shamefully neglected in modern theology and preaching. Consider so-called evangelical preaching. One may encounter pseudo-dramatism. He may hear the imperatives pulverizing the people of God. He may listen to sickeningly glib clichés rolling off the preacher's tongue with the greatest of ease. But where is that careful exegesis of the text? Where is that great concern to represent the message of the passage of Scripture? Ultimately, is not our view of the Word seen more in what we do with it than in what we say about it? Have we not separated the Spirit from the Word in our foolish notion that scholarship on the part of the minister of God is to be subordinated to emotional attachment, which we call "spirituality"? If we really believe that the Word and Spirit are inseparable, would this not be shown in a high quality of exegesis and exposition? The truly scholarly labors of both Luther and Calvin call the quality of all modern ministries into question. The Bible is absolutely necessary, the only authority, completely sufficient, and, under the ministry of the Spirit, essentially clear.