

THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

THE WRITTEN WORD IS ENOUGH

The Reformation recovered the understanding that all things necessary for salvation are available to us in the Scriptures alone.

Peter Waldo (c. 1140 – c. 1217), John Wycliffe (c. 1324 – 1384), John Huss (1372 – 1415), Girolamo Savonarola (1452 – 1498), and others, all addressed abuses and errors within the Church from the authority of Scripture. They were condemned, persecuted, and some even martyred because of it. When Peter Waldo could not find salvation through the priests, he discovered the Scripture where he found Christ.

Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, said, “The Word of God is certain and can never fail. It is clear, and will never leave us in darkness. It teaches its own truth. It arises and irradiates the soul of man with full salvation and grace. It gives the soul sure comfort in God. It humbles it, so that it loses and indeed condemns itself and lays hold of God.”¹

SUFFICIENCY

Scripture is not only our final authority, it is our only sufficient authority. According to Sola Scriptura, the authority of Scripture is the consequence of its nature. Scripture is authoritative because of what Scripture is—or better because of Who breathed it. Sola Scriptura maintains that the Scripture is inspired (God-breathed), inerrant (without error), and clear, and therefore sufficient for salvation and all of life and practice for the redeemed. This is plainly echoed in the following confessions:

The Belgic Confession (1561): We believe that these Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation, is sufficiently taught therein.²

The Thirty-Nine Articles (1563): Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.³

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646): The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men⁴.

¹ Huldrych Zwingli, “Of the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God,” in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, 93.

² Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translations*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 389.

³ G. R. Evans and J. Robert Wright, *The Anglican Tradition: A Handbook of Sources* (London: SPCK, 1991), 230.

⁴ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:603.

INSPIRATION

Representing the principal view of Sola Scriptura, John Calvin comments on 2 Timothy 3:16 with these words:

In order to uphold the authority of the Scripture, [Paul] declares that it *is divinely inspired*; for, if it be so, it is beyond all controversy that men ought to receive it with reverence. This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God hath spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. Whoever then wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him, first of all, lay down this as a settled point, that the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit. ... Accordingly, we need not wonder if there are many who doubt as to the Author of the Scripture; for, although the majesty of God is displayed in it, yet none but those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit have eyes to perceive what ought, indeed, to have been visible to all, and yet is visible to the elect alone. This is the first clause, that we owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God; because it has proceeded from him alone, and has nothing belonging to man mixed with it.⁵

INERRANCY

Martin Luther repeatedly affirmed the inerrancy, or unfailing nature, of Scripture. In commenting on a miraculous event in Scripture, Luther quickly reminds his reader, “we dare not give preference to the authority of men over that of Scripture! Human beings can err, but the Word of God is the very wisdom of God and the absolutely infallible truth.”⁶ Again, “The Word is so irreproachable that not a single iota can err in the Law or the divine promises. For that reason we must yield to no sect, not even in one tittle of Scripture, no matter how much they clamor and accuse us of violating love when we hold so strictly to the Word.”⁷ Elsewhere, Luther writes, “I shall gladly believe that the men I have mentioned—such as Gregory, Ambrose, and Augustine—were holy men; but I do not trust myself to them. For their holiness does not make them infallible, and it does not imply that one must rely and depend on all the dicta of the fathers or approve and believe all their teachings. Rather take the touchstone of God’s Word into your hands. Let this be your criterion for testing, trying, and judging all that the fathers have preached, written, and said, as well as all the precepts and human ordinances that have been promulgated. Otherwise one will be easily misled and deceived.”⁸

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 248–249.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 1:122.

⁷ Luther, *Works*, 12:242.

⁸ Luther, *Works*, 22:254.

SUMMARY OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

Roman Catholic	Evangelical
Tradition <i>and</i> Scripture (§80)	Scripture <i>over</i> Tradition
Scripture proceeds <i>from</i> the Church (§98)	The Church proceeds <i>from</i> Scripture
Salvation is through the Church in the administration of the sacraments (§1987-§1995)	Salvation is by faith in the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17)
Scripture alone is not sufficient for salvation or life (§183)	Scripture alone is sufficient for salvation by faith (2 Timothy 3:15) and for life in godliness (2 Peter 1:3; 3:16)

EARLY REFORMATION CONFESSIONS

THE SIXTY-SEVEN ARTICLES (1523) — ULRICH ZWINGLI

In 1523, Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer from Zurich, presented sixty-seven arguments in defense of a return to biblical Christianity at a public disputation in Baden. “In these Articles he maintains the supremacy of the Word of God and the all sufficiency of the atoning work of Christ. He rejects the papacy, priestly mediation, the mass, and good works as contrary to Holy Scripture.”⁹ The preface and conclusion reads respectively:

The articles and opinions below, I, Ulrich Zwingli, confess to have preached in the worthy city of Zurich as based upon the Scriptures which are called inspired by God, and I offer to protect and conquer with the said articles, and where I have not now correctly understood said Scriptures I shall allow myself to be taught better, but only from said Scriptures.

...

Let no one undertake here to argue with sophistry or human foolishness, but come to the Scriptures to accept them as the judge (for the Scriptures breathe the Spirit of God), so that the truth either may be found, or if found, as I hope, retained. Amen.
Thus may God rule.¹⁰

⁹ Samuel Simpson, *Life of Ulrich Zwingli: The Swiss Patriot and Reformer* (New York: Baker & Taylor Co., 1902), 120.

¹⁰ Ulrich Zwingli, *Selected Works*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (1972), 111-17.

THE TEN CONCLUSIONS OF BERNE (1528)

[These Ten Conclusions were carefully prepared by Berthold Haller and Francis Kolb, Reformed ministers at Berne, and, at their request, revised and published by Zwingli (in German, Latin, and French) for a large religious Conference held in the capital of Switzerland, Jan. 7–26, 1528. They were approved by all the leading Swiss Reformers, and also by Ambrosius Blaarer of Constance, Bucer and Capito of Strasburg, and others, who attended the Conference. The result of the Conference was the complete triumph of the Reformation in Berne.]¹¹

1. The holy Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, and abides in the same, and listens not to the voice of a stranger.
2. The Church of Christ makes no laws and commandments without the Word of God. Hence human traditions are no more binding on us than as far as they are founded in the Word of God.
3. Christ is the only wisdom, righteousness, redemption, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. Hence it is a denial of Christ when we confess another ground of salvation and satisfaction.
4. The essential and corporal presence of the body and blood of Christ cannot be demonstrated from the Holy Scripture.
5. The mass as now in use, in which Christ is offered to God the Father for the sins of the living and the dead, is contrary to the Scripture, a blasphemy against the most holy sacrifice, passion, and death of Christ, and on account of its abuses an abomination before God.
6. As Christ alone died for us, so he is also to be adored as the only Mediator and Advocate between God the Father and the believers. Therefore it is contrary to the Word of God to propose and invoke other mediators.
7. Scripture knows nothing of a purgatory after this life. Hence all masses and other offices for the dead¹ are useless.
8. The worship of images is contrary to Scripture. Therefore images should be abolished when they are set up as objects of adoration.
9. Matrimony is not forbidden in the Scripture to any class of men; but fornication and unchastity are forbidden to all.
10. Since, according to the Scripture, an open fornicator must be excommunicated, it follows that unchastity and impure celibacy are more pernicious to the clergy than to any other class.

All to the glory of God and his holy Word.¹²

¹¹ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:208.

¹² Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 104–105.

THE FIRST HELVETIC CONFESSION (1536) — HEINRICH BULLINGER

The following excerpts are taken from the first common confession of the Reformation. It was led by Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger, with the assistance of Martin Bucer and others. "Luther, to whom a copy was sent through Bucer, expressed unexpectedly, in two remarkable letters, his satisfaction with the earnest Christian character of this document, and promised to do all he could to promote union and harmony with the Swiss."¹³ Sadly, this ideal of unity was never fully realized between the Lutherans and the Swiss Reformed. It would, however, become the first confession embraced by the whole of the Reformed church in Switzerland (Helvetia).

The keynote that opens this confessional document is *Sola Scriptura*, represented in its first five articles.

ARTICLE I – The Sacred Scripture

The Canonical Scripture, being the Word of God, and delivered by the Holy Ghost, and published to the world by the prophets and apostles, being of all others the most perfect and ancient philosophy, doth alone perfectly contain all piety and good ordering of life (2 Peter 1; 2 Timothy 3).

ARTICLE II – The Interpretation of Scripture

The interpretation hereof is to be taken only from herself, that herself may be the interpreter of herself, the rule of charity and faith being her guide (John 5; Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 13).

ARTICLE III – The Ancient Fathers

Which kind of interpretation so far forth as the holy Fathers have followed, we do not only receive them as interpreters of the Scripture, but reverence them as the beloved instruments of God.

ARTICLE IV – Human Traditions

But as for the Traditions of men, although never so glorious and received, how many soever of them do withdraw or hinder us [from the Scriptures], as of things unprofitable and hurtful, so we answer with that saying of the Lord, "They worship me in vain, teaching the doctrine of man" (Mark 7:7; Matthew 15; Isaiah 29; Titus 1; 1 Timothy 4).

ARTICLE V – The Scope of Scripture

The scope of the canonical Scripture is this: that God [has good-will] to mankind; and by Christ the Lord his Son, hath declared this good-will; which is received by faith alone; and faith must be effectual through love, that it may be shewed forth by an innocent life (Genesis 3; John 3; Ephesians 2).¹⁴

¹³ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:389.

¹⁴ Adapted from Peter Lillback and Richard Gaffin, "The First Helvetic Confession (1536)" in *Thy Word is Still Truth*, 103-105.

THE SCOTTS CONFESSION OF FAITH (1561) — JOHN KNOX

ARTICLE XIX

As we believe and confess the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make the man of God perfect, so do we affirm and avow the authority of the same to be of God, and neither to depend on men nor angels. We affirm therefore that such as allege the Scripture to have no [other] authority, but that which is received from the Kirk, to be blasphemous against God and injurious to the true Kirk, which always heareth and obeyeth the voice of her own Spouse and Pastor, but taketh not upon her to be mistress over the same.¹⁵

THE BELGIC CONFESSION OF FAITH (1561)

ARTICLE III — The Written Word of God

We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of man, but that *men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit*, as the apostle Peter says; and that afterwards God, from a special care which He has for us and our salvation, commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed word to writing; and He Himself wrote with His own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.

ARTICLE V — Whence the Holy Scriptures Derive Their Dignity and Authority

We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the Church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they carry the evidence thereof in themselves. For the very blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled.

ARTICLE VII — The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures to Be the Only Rule of Faith

We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures: *nay, though it were an angel from heaven*, as the apostle Paul says. For since it is forbidden to *add unto or take away anything from the Word of God*, it does thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects.

Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all; *for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself*. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule, as the apostles have taught us, saying, Prove the spirits, whether they are of God. Likewise: *If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Robert B. Laurin, *Baker's Dictionary of Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), 127.

¹⁶ *Historic Creeds and Confessions*, (Oak Harbor: Lexham Press, 1997).