

The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures to be the Only Rule of Faith (3)

Text: Belgic Confession 7; Matthew 15:1-14

Many are familiar with the Five Points of Calvinism: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints. These doctrines are often summarized under the acronym TULIP. Alongside them are the five “*solas*” of the Reformation: salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone and according to Scripture alone. The final “*sola*” – *sola scriptura*, or Scripture alone – is the subject of this study.

Sola scriptura is frequently misunderstood. For one, it does not mean that the Bible is the only book a Christian should or read or use; nor does it mean that the Bible answers every question in life, from fixing a computer to passing an exam. Nor does it exclude the value of commentaries, theological writings or church history – on the contrary, those who uphold *sola scriptura* often seek out such resources more diligently. Neither does it deny the role of the Holy Spirit, the church, Christian fellowship or ordained officebearers. The Reformers who taught *sola scriptura* also wrote creeds and catechisms – the *Belgic Confession* itself is a product of this commitment. Thus, *sola scriptura* is not a rejection of church authority, theological tradition or mutual accountability.

What *Sola Scriptura* Affirms

Positively, *sola scriptura* means that the Bible alone is inspired. According to II Timothy 3:16, all Scripture is “given by inspiration of God” – that is, it is God-breathed. Many books exist, but only *one* bears divine breath. Just as there is *one* Son of God, there is *one* God-breathed book. The Bible alone is also infallible – incapable of error. It is inerrant because it is infallible. A fallible person can say something inerrant, such as “ $2 + 2 = 4$,” but that doesn’t make them infallible. The Bible is infallible in every word because it is the Word of God.

Sola scriptura also affirms that the Bible is the only verbal revelation of God today. This is distinct from general revelation, as Psalm 19 explains: the heavens declare God’s glory, but Scripture alone gives us God’s Word in *words*. The Bible is also distinguished from past verbal revelations. Christ and the apostles taught things not recorded in Scripture, but those revelations have ceased.

Today, the Bible alone is God's written Word. That phrase captures the core of *sola scriptura*.

Moreover, *sola scriptura* teaches that the Bible is the supreme authority in all matters of faith and life. It is not only sufficient but also final. *Westminster Confession* 1.10 puts it plainly: the supreme judge in all controversies of religion "can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture." Scripture alone settles doctrinal and ethical disputes. It approves what is true, condemns what is false and defines what is indifferent. Matters like food choices or clothing colour are *adiaphora*—neither morally right nor wrong—and fall under Christian liberty.

The Biblical Basis for *Sola Scriptura*

To establish *sola scriptura*, we turn to the Bible itself. II Timothy 3:16–17 states that all Scripture is "given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." If Scripture alone equips for every good work, then no additional authority is needed. Isaiah 8:20 likewise says, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." All teachings must be judged by the Word.

Acts 17 commends the Bereans for testing Paul's teaching by the Scriptures (v. 11). If even the apostles were subject to the Word, all other teachers certainly are. Jesus Himself rebuked the Pharisees in Matthew 15 for nullifying God's Word through their traditions (v. 3). He called their worship vain because they taught man-made commandments as doctrine (vv. 6, 9).

Belgic Confession article 7 reflects this same conviction: "Neither do we consider of equal value any writing of men, however holy these men may have been, with those divine Scriptures." Not Calvin, not Augustine, not Spurgeon, or any modern theologian is above the Word. All must be tested by Scripture. The confession continues: "[N]or 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."

Rome holds that Scripture and tradition are twin sources of revelation, but when they disagree, tradition overrules. The Reformed reject this. None of the mentioned human authorities are equal to Scripture, but that does not mean they are of *no* value.

The Church, Confessions, and True Authority

The Reformed position avoids both the error of Rome and the error of the Anabaptists. Rome makes tradition equal to Scripture; the Anabaptists reject all tradition and act as if the true church disappeared for 1400 years. This view, known as *restorationism*, rejects church history and creeds. But the Reformed position is different. It recognizes the Spirit's work through the church's history. We weigh past writings, test them by Scripture and retain what is good.

Unfortunately, a restorationist mindset persists today in much of evangelicalism. Many reject creeds, ignore church history, and treat church life as optional. *Sola scriptura* becomes "*solo*" *scriptura*: me and my Bible alone. But the Bible teaches that Christ builds His church, gives her teachers and authorises synods (as in Acts 15) to resolve disputes. Scripture commands the preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments, exercise of discipline and confession of doctrine.

Faithful preaching is the Word of God in a derived sense. The *Second Helvetic Confession* says, "The preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God." Ministers and elders have real authority, but it is subordinate to Scripture. Church discipline rightly administered is binding on earth and in heaven. The church has real authority, yet it remains fallible and accountable to Scripture.

Doctrine must be drawn from Scripture by good and necessary consequence. Creeds summarize this doctrine. Though not infallible, they possess authority when faithfully echoing the Word. If one denies Scripture, the church must discipline. If one questions the creed, the church must examine the claim by the Word. Scripture is the supreme judge.

Thus, the Reformed confession of *sola scriptura* is clear: the Bible alone is the inspired, infallible, written Word of God. It alone judges all matters of faith and life. It is above tradition, creeds, synods, ministers and all human authorities. Yet it also affirms and orders the life of the church, including confessions, preaching and discipline. Scripture alone is our highest authority because it is the Word of the living God.

