

The Sufficiency of Scripture

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This article discusses how the recovery of the doctrine, "Sola Scriptura" would restore the much needed regulation and reformation of the Church.

"As I have suggested, (the 1970's) was a time when the confessional and theological character of evangelicalism began to fade, leaving the churches wide open to the intrusions of raw pragmatism. As theology moved from the center to the periphery of evangelical faith, technique moved from the periphery to the center. The one gained at the cost of the other." David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, p71

Jesus said:

"And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?... you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition' Matt 15:2-3,6

As the church has developed over the years in America, she has accumulated a host of maladies from her surrounding culture which I believe were innocently acquired, but as they gained strength, worked to dwindle our appreciation for the techniques and practices described in the Word of God.

Understanding the doctrine known as "sola Scriptura" is critical to help us see what has happened to the church in modern times. The French Confession of Faith, 1559 states this doctrine clearly:

We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from him alone, and not from men. And in as much as it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, nor even for angels to add to it, or to take away from it, or to change it. Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them." (Quoted by Robert L. Saucy in "Scripture" P234)

Do we really believe in the sufficiency of Scripture? Are the forms and directions for church life found in the Bible sufficient? Is there need for more? Do we need additional (to the apostles requirements) structure and practice to accomplish the work of Christ? The doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture answers "no."

One of the important assumptions behind this thinking is that the church is not our invention. Jesus said "I will build My church." He has chosen to build it upon the instruction of the Apostles. The church is not something that we must reinvent in every

generation, for every generation. The church should not be built by the creative efforts of His people. The church has a Head and He has spoken clearly enough.

Make no mistake about it, the people of God have been given clear practices and standards and we should keep them "on task" in every generation.

- * Preaching the Word may not be the most stylish or engaging method for your generation;

- * The public reading of scripture may not be the most entertaining means of communication;

- * Celebrating communion may not be the most popular rite;

- * Prayer may not be the most exciting activity;

- * Church discipline may not be the most appreciated tool;

But, whether they are acceptable or popular with Christians and so called "seekers" (Romans 3:8) or not, Scripture calls for them to be practiced in the church.

Is there freedom to add structure beyond what the apostles prescribed? The answer is yes. But it should be a qualified "yes." "Yes," only in the sense that if the church is fulfilling what is clear in the Bible, then perhaps she could move on and provide additional structure to bring the message of the cross to the community and to equip the saints.

However, these structures should not be replacements to the Biblical order. Most people believe that some creativity can be good for the church. But if, in our creativity, we leave out what is foundational, we have harmed the church.

For instance, take church structure for training children in God's Word. The primary method for training Christian young people is the modern Sunday school structure. Huge resources are dedicated to maintaining this structure in almost every church in America. Yet, this structure cannot be found anywhere in scripture. It is not commanded in scripture. It is not demonstrated in scripture. It is not clear from any Biblical text, that our modern method has any basis in scripture.

But there is something clear and commanded and demonstrated in scripture for teaching children God's Word: fathers. If we only had scripture, we would have to conclude that God's way of teaching children is through the engagement of fathers.

Since scripture speaks clearly on the matter, then it is the responsibility of church leaders to insure that what is clear and what is commanded and what is demonstrated in scripture is fulfilled in their ministries.

But, if we are spending our energies on things like Sunday schools, and the fathers are not playing their role, then we would have to conclude that we have misdirected our efforts.

Cultural blinders affect us all

Trusting in the Word of God is difficult for all of us, particularly in view of the fact that we have been raised in a culture that is everywhere so clearly in rebellion against it. We are not even fully aware of our own tarnishing within our own culture, which makes us overwhelmingly dependent upon the grace of God. Our best efforts will always lack in some way compared with the glory of God. We "fall short" without even trying... and often without even knowing it. Romans 3:23-26

Our churches fall short in their sincere attempts to be obedient to God in church life simply because of the fallen culture within which they exist.

None of us should be overly proud of ourselves when we think of the kinds of churches we have built or participated in. Every single Christian is off center, and "falls short." I myself "see through a glass darkly", and am the "chief of sinners". All of the churches mentioned in the New Testament had their problems and we are no different.

But at least we have a sufficient and fixed point of reference through which to evaluate our lives our churches and our culture. As the trends twist and turn in our culture, it is so important that we are saturated with the Word of God, so that when we look behind and ahead, we understand what we see in light of scripture.

What forces have led us away from our fixed point of reference?

What has caused the rejection of sola Scriptura?

The roots of rejection can be found in a popular philosophy of life: pragmatism. Pragmatism is an ideology that judges the value of an activity by how well or how poorly it fulfills its intended purpose without making a critical judgment on whether or not that purpose is the ultimate purpose. Its ideology can be summarized by the phrase, "the end justifies the means." In other words, "do what it takes."

For the American church, we "do what takes" to grow. In this sense we reflect the common culture surrounding us.

Most of the people in our culture highly esteem growth of any kind. We almost worship it. We are culturally imbued with an inclination to find "the next new thing" that will change everything and make us more successful. We like what works. A respected Christian business man once said: "successful people find out how things work and they get on the right side of it." I like that statement. I have quoted it many times. It ministers to me. There is something important about what he said, and I want my children to understand its meaning. Why wouldn't I like his statement? I am an American.

Like me, our culture is saturated in success ideology, and if something is not working or growing, we find another way.

In the church, when we are dissatisfied with the growth rates, we do what every red blooded American would do: seek methods that are more effective. Like Thomas Edison, we will try everything... or even worse, anything. We are programmed this way. We cannot help but to ask how we can make things grow faster.

"Let's Find the Best Ways to Reach Our Community"

Much our thinking about church structure is driven by a question that is natural to all of us: "What is the best way to reach our community"? This has become the driving question of the modern church.

The answers to the question have, at the very best, produced valuable services to the community, and at the worst have produced a secular and worldly church that has begun to mirror the world it was called to save.

For most churches however, the answers to the question leads them to spend their energies on things that are beyond the clear teaching of scripture. It leads to ministries that have some good effects, but in the final analysis, they have replaced what is Biblical.

But is this even the right question? Is this a question that the apostles ask? Do they ask us to ask this question?

In the Bible, we are never encouraged to "find the best way to reach the community." The question itself is the wrong question. And yet, this question is intuitive to us. It is the most natural question for us to ask.

The doctrine of sola scriptura would lead us to believe that the best ways to reach our communities have already been stated in the Bible. The Word has spoken. The Apostles have written. Scripture is sufficient. There is no need for new technique.

The question, however sincere, exposes one of the sources of the secularism in our churches – we are more concerned with our techniques and growth than almost anything else. We are a self obsessed church in the midst of a self obsessed world.

Let me be clear here. I do not believe that it is always wrong to ask this question. But, I do believe that, this most prominent question among American church members, has lead us away from the clear teaching of scripture.