

3. The attributes of Scripture: a doctrinal outline

1. The Sufficiency of Scripture

Definition: Everything that we need to know to be saved and live a life that pleases God is taught in Scripture

OR The Bible is itself God's complete covenant-promise to us

Biblical basis: Ps 119.1; 2 Tim 3.15-17; Rev 22.18-19

History:

'To be sure, the sacred and divinely inspired Scriptures are sufficient for the exposition of the truth'. Athanasius, *contra Gentes* 1, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 4 (Eerdmans, 1957). (4th century).

'Among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters that concern faith and the manner of life - to wit, hope and love'. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2 (Eerdmans, 1956), ii.9. (4th-5th century).

'The truth of faith is sufficiently plain in the teaching of Christ and the Apostles'. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* ii.ii.q1.a10 (Blackfriars, 1964-). (13th century).

'Biblical Scripture ... alone deals with everything that serves the true knowledge, love and honour of God, as well as true piety and the making of a godly, honest and blessed life'. (First Helvetic Confession, 1536).

Theological and practical significance:

- It is not claimed that the Bible necessarily speaks exhaustively or directly on every issue it touches on.
- The church has no extra teachings which we must acknowledge as being from God: we are not required to do anything that is not commanded in Scripture.
- It is not claimed that God does not continue to 'speak' (prompt, guide, and direct, without directly using the Bible), but no contemporary 'words' from God are to be placed on a level with Scripture.

2. The Clarity (Perspicuity) of Scripture

Definition: The Bible presents its teachings with sufficient clarity that those who read it carefully, seeking God's help, can understand it

OR Everyone who comes to Scripture wanting to understand God's covenant-promise can do so

Biblical basis:

Ps 119.9-16; 2 Cor 1.13-14 ('external' clarity)

Ps 119.33-34; 1 Cor 2.13-15 ('internal' clarity)

History:

'Almost nothing is dug out of those obscure passages which may not be found set forth in the plainest language elsewhere'. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, ii.6.8.

The Middle Ages: Church as the interpreter of Scripture.

'Seeing how dangerous it would be to boast of the Spirit without the Word ... [God] declared that the Church is indeed governed by the Holy Spirit, but in order that the government might not be vague or unstable, he annexed it to the Word.' John Calvin, in *A Reformation Debate. Sadoleto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply* (Harper & Row, 1966), p.60. (16th century).

'Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit.' John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Westminster Press, 1960), i.8.13.

Theological significance:

Neither the teaching-office of the church nor an individual who claims to be particularly Spirit-filled can claim to be the true interpreter of Scripture.

The Holy Spirit is at work through the Word to illumine the Word; he is not primarily at work through the church or an 'authoritative' individual to illumine the Word.

At stake here is a biblical doctrine of the Trinity: we must not separate Scripture (which is the speech, or 'speech-act', of the Father and of the Son) from the action of the Holy Spirit.

Practical significance:

It is not claimed that the Bible is necessarily clear on every topic it touches on

The necessity of biblical scholarship is not denied

The right authority of the traditions of biblical interpretation is not denied

It is not claimed that hearing God speak in Scripture is a primarily individualistic event

A diversity of interpretation does not necessarily mean that Scripture is unclear

3. The Necessity of Scripture

We cannot be conscious of entering into and remaining in a right relationship with God without encountering what God says in the Bible

OR We cannot consciously put our trust in God's covenant (and thereby put our trust in God) without the Bible by which God declares his covenant to us

Biblical basis: Rom 1.18-21; Matt 4.4; Rom 10.13-17; 1 John 5.3.

History:

'There is no place where Thou are more clearly discovered than in Thy words'. Eriugena, *Periphysion* (Bellarmine, 1987). (9th century)

'Theology does not concern anything except what is contained in Scripture, and what may be drawn from this'. Duns Scotus, quoted in A. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Blackwell, 1987), p.140. (13th century)

Theological and practical significance:

General revelation cannot be the basis of saving faith

Constant engagement with Scripture must be central to Christian living

Summary

'*Sola Scriptura*' - not so much 'Scripture alone' as 'Scripture supreme'.