

Scripture as "Necessary, Sufficient and Reliable"
(based on a paper presented within the report of the Committee on Church Doctrine
and adopted by the General Assembly of 2010)

The words which the Presbyterian Church in Canada has used in recent confessional documents¹ to describe the Bible, as the Holy Scripture of the Church are "necessary," "sufficient" and "reliable". These terms are employed in continuity with Reformed confessional history on the nature and function of Holy Scripture. All three terms describe a property that accrues to the Bible because of God's ongoing use of it in the life of the Christian Church. Each of them is crucial in our understanding of faithful and relevant biblical interpretation.

Holy Scripture is **necessary** because it is the means by which saving knowledge of Jesus Christ is received in the power of the Holy Spirit. In its totality the Bible is a record of revelation which points to the living Word of God. The origin of the Bible is found in the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit. The unique authority of the Bible is accredited by and interpretative prowess is attributed to the inner work and witness of the same Spirit. As such the Bible is the standard by which "any word" (*Living Faith*, 5.1) which comes to the church must be evaluated. A "word" that comes to the church may be received, it may be rejected, it may be critically appropriated; but scripture empowered by the Holy Spirit is the senior partner in such negotiations. One of the ways in which the Reformed tradition has pointed to the 'necessity' of the Bible is found in the maxim: "the Church is reformed and always reforming [or better: always in need of reform] according to the Word of God." Holy Scripture, as witness to the Word of God, Jesus Christ, is the word of God written (*Living Faith*, 5.2) and is of necessity implicated in this ongoing work of reforming the church, which tries to keep faith with God in the time in which it lives. [T]o be reformed means that all worship, all doctrine, all practice, in short, the whole of life, are to be called into question and transformed in the light of the living and dynamic Word of God. Reform, in other words, is not in the service of a program of our own devising (retrieving, revisiting, etc.) but occurs as a gift of God's own ongoing work in the world. To put it plainly, reform is an act of God.²

At the most basic literary level, when we confess that scripture is **sufficient**, we mean that it is "good enough;"³ that as a text it is determinative enough to tell us what it wants to say and to offer resistance to our attempts to make it say what it does not. The scriptures are "sufficient...revealing Jesus Christ, the living Word" (*Living Faith*, 5.2). In *A Catechism for Today*, Question 63, the words "for our salvation" are added after the word "sufficient." This alludes to the end for which Scripture is given. Each book has what is called an "internal testimony" a job it is designed to do or message it is to promote. The end of the Bible is to promote salvation. Where it speaks outside this realm, as, for example, on matters of science, it is what Calvin regarded as a book for the "unlearned."⁴ It speaks what is sufficient to know toward its end (salvation) on these matters, but does not speak with the precision of a scientific text book. That is not its purpose.

The Bible's sufficiency and effectiveness in drawing those who read it into the reconciling work of Jesus Christ is rooted in the power of the Spirit. And so sufficiency is not only a literary property of the Bible. God works by means of the scriptural witness; it is

¹ *Living Faith* and *A Catechism for Today*

² William Stacey Johnson, "Theology and the Church's Mission: Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, and Reformed", in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, Grand Rapids, 2003, p. 65-66.

³ The phrase is Frank Kermode's cited in Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, New Haven, 1992, p. 86-87.

⁴ Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, Notre Dame University Press, 2007, p. 37.

sufficient because it is made so by the work of God through it. The relationship of the Spirit to scripture is dynamic and ongoing. That's why our tradition speaks of prayer and relying on the Holy Spirit when it talks about scripture reading. Interpreters rely on the illumination of the Spirit, who overcomes our self-love and idolatry so that scripture becomes sufficient and effective for faith and life. John Calvin tended to be less concerned with technical expertise than with our resistance to the Holy Spirit where it came to failing at scripture interpretation: a reminder that even if there was an "inerrant" text there are no inerrant interpreters. Human willfulness, vanity, instability, sheer artfulness and love of novelty and unwillingness to trust God in acts of obedience (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.iv.1; I.v.12, I.vi.1-3) must be overcome by the Spirit so that we hear what scripture says to us. Scripture interpretation is thus a spiritual discipline, the joyous act of disciples, which involves dying (mortification) and rising (vivification) with Christ as we hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.⁵

The sufficiency of scripture does not however relieve interpreters of hard work of biblical interpretation or of respectful listening to those who have gone before us. Scripture is a collection of literature from a variety of historical and cultural contexts not our own. *Living Faith* reminds us that "the writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought and setting of its time" (*Living Faith*, 5.4). This means that research into historical and cultural context is valuable for biblical interpretation in our own time. We need to understand practices and customs and languages not our own if we are going to be responsible to the authoritative text of the Bible. "[I]nterpretation of the Bible requires human scholarship in order to establish the best text, to understand the original languages, and to interpret the influence of the historical and cultural context in which the divine message has come."⁶

One of the checks against interpretative free-play is provided by linguistic and cultural study. The reformers of the sixteenth century borrowed from the literary and historical studies of the Renaissance to bring under textual control fanciful allegorical interpretation that was not tethered to the text. The plain or literal sense (historical-grammatical, literary and Christ-centered sense) was and still ought to be used to rein in excessive, self-interested and self-serving interpretation of the Bible.

Scripture ought to be read for its obvious and natural linguistic and historical sense and in the light of Christ who is the scope (target) of the overall narrative of the Bible.⁷ Study involves comparing passages in the Bible, interpreting one passage in conversation with another and relating the two testaments to each other (*Living Faith*, 5.4). In the Reformed tradition, scripture interprets scripture; the more difficult and obscure passages are interpreted in the light of the less difficult and more clear.⁸ The Bible as a whole is read as a single story connected by typology and figuration and centered in the person of Jesus Christ.⁹ It ought to be said that none of these reading strategies and not even all of them together provides anything like a sure and certain interpretation and application of every

⁵ See John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Doctrinal Sketch*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 86-106.

⁶ *Biblical Authority and Interpretation*, New York: Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship, The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1982, p. 11

⁷ See Calvin, Sermon 15 on Ephesians, *CO51: 427C*, Sermon, 217 and Morna Hooker, "Where is Wisdom to be Found? Colossians 1:15-20 (1)", in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom*, edited by David F. Ford and Graham Stanton, London, 2003, p. 126-128.

⁸ See Jan Rohls, "Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen", *Columbia Series in Reformed Theology*, translated by John F. Hoffmeyer, Louisville, 1998, p. 41.

⁹ See for example, George Lindbeck, "Scripture, Consensus and Community", in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, Eerdmans, 1989, p. 76ff, and "The Story Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation" in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, Fortress, 1987, p. 161-78.

passage. However, listening to the plural voices of the Bible (in their discord and unity) guards against ideological interpretation, which attempts to “house-break” the Bible and thus the Gospel; that is, to make it captive to an ego or ethnocentric cause or movement. In addition, listening to the voices of readers from difference contexts and experiences can enrich Christ-centered understandings of scripture.

Reformed biblical interpretation also practices an interpretative fellowship of the saints, humbly learning from those who have gone before us and from those whom God has gifted as scripture interpreters and scripture teachers of the Church. Most people do not gain their knowledge of the content of the Bible, at least initially, by means of the Bible. Church School teachers and parents and preachers are often the means by which the story of salvation is heard. However, all of these means of sharing the good news of reconciliation are rooted in the scriptural witness. The creeds and confessions of the church, while not infallible guides, do function to guide reading – like our mothers and fathers in the faith – and so ought to be honoured in the task of scripture interpretation. *Living Faith* asserts: “Those who seek to understand the Bible need to stand within the church and listen to its teaching.” The sufficiency of the scriptures includes then not only (1) the Spirit’s regenerating work by means of the Bible, (2) a Christ centered canonical reading of the Bible and (3) critical historical and literary study but also (4) participation in an interdependent community where scripture is read, heard, interpreted and inhabited together with a teachable spirit.

When we confess that scripture is “reliable” we do so in keeping with what we have already said about the humanity of the Bible. The Bible was “written with human hands” (*Living Faith*, 5.2) and so its writing is “conditioned” (*Living Faith*, 5.4). When we say scripture is reliable, we do not deny that the Bible is a human and historical document written in specific times and places and that it reflects ancient cosmologies, for example, that we no longer espouse. While we confess that the Bible is reliable, we want to be careful to avoid biblical docetism -- that the Bible only *seems* human. A number of Reformed theologians make the point that when we push reliability too far, we risk denying the real humanity of the scriptural witness. What’s more, this move tends toward overriding the variety of the kinds of literature that make up the Bible. Poetry and wisdom and even parts of the Gospel accounts, for example, dissolve in our hands when we press them to deliver a scientific brand of ‘facticity’ with which the texts themselves aren’t concerned. As interpreters we need to reckon with the material at hand – What kind of literature is it? Does the text claim to report ‘facts’ so that what it means is tied up with the accuracy of events it reports? Now and again the Bible does this: “if Christ is not raised our faith is in vain;” but ‘facticity’¹⁰ may be a modern preoccupation that narrows our model by which the Scriptures convey ‘Truth.’ On the other hand, there are many genres in the Bible and sometimes the Bible does speak “literally.” It may also belie a modern sense of historical arrogance to suppose that ancient authors spoke in literal forms which we, in our greater state of enlightenment know to be figures and metaphors. Ancient authors were able to tell the difference between the genre of history and myth. Not all of their words need to be “demythologized.” While it is sometimes a temptation for modern people to engage in biblical docetism, it may also be a temptation for us to engage in biblical adoptionism -- as if the Bible were only the record of the experience of human religious communities, and not also the self-revelation of God: the gift of God, accommodated to human capacity. In pre-modern times, believing Christians never considered it necessary to confess the human authorship of Scripture as an article of faith -- human authorship was obvious. Rather they

¹⁰ See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, New Haven, 1974, p. 1-16

confessed as an article of faith the divine authorship, discerning beyond the multiplicity of voices, a single witness -- the communication of God.

Reliability, as we ascribe this quality to the Bible, is reliability as the scriptures reveal Jesus Christ, the living Word. Like every witness, or every group of witnesses, we can through a variety of voices hear enough about an event to make sense of it. Reformed theologian Emil Brunner, says that listening to the scriptural witness for the "Master's voice" is something like listening to a recording of uneven quality in which the voice of the Master Vocalist can be heard.¹¹ Scripture, we might say, is reliable enough to point us to God's covenantal work of reconciliation in Christ. Reliability is related, however, most directly to the Spirit's ongoing work by means of scripture. Sometimes when reliability is made simply into a literary property of the Bible, the role of the Spirit is marginalized. Interpreters can make scriptural interpretation into a rational enterprise of sorting out what the text says by any relatively enlightened one-dimensional interpreter. Our confessional standards and liturgical practices reinforce again and again the importance of the Spirit to the reliability of scripture. "Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church" is not rhetorical extravagance but a critical moment in the life of the people who would hear scripture as the Word of God. This is why Martin Luther King Jr. could say, "Sometimes Aunt Jane on her knees can get more truth than the philosopher on his tiptoes."¹² Typically, assuming a posture of mastery through technique is less promising than the posture of dependence, which is prayer for the Holy Spirit, where it comes to scripture interpretation. A Catechism for Today, Question 67

Q. Should Christians read the Bible?

A. Yes. The regular reading and study of scripture, together with the hearing of the word in public worship, are some of the richest joys of Christian commitment.

¹¹ Emil Brunner, *Our Faith*, New York, 1936, p. 10.

¹² "The American Dream" in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, New York, 2000, p. 94.