

# The Insufficiency of Scripture

by T. David Gordon

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If someone had asked me a decade ago about the sufficiency of scripture, I would have given a zealous defense of the historic Reformed position. I would do the same today; I still affirm the historic Reformed view of the sufficiency of scripture, with almost no variation from its expression in the Westminster Confession's first chapter:

*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 men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge...that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (WCF 1:6, italics added)*

I would clarify, however, that "faith and life" must be taken in its religious sense. I would also clarify that the entire thing would have been better expressed had the divines articulated a more-manifestly covenantal statement, indicating that the scriptures are a sufficient guide to the various covenants God has made with his various covenant people through the centuries, and that the entire canon, taken in its entirety, is sufficient therefore to govern the members of the New Covenant made in Christ. I would clarify that the divines intended by "faith and life," what one is to believe, and what one is to do, as a member of the New Covenant community.

To demonstrate that such is a correct reading of the Assembly's intent, I would call attention to the qualification near the end, regarding "circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church," which are to be governed *not* by scripture, but by the light of nature and Christian prudence. Why would the divines have added this qualification regarding the life of the covenant community ("worship...government of the church"), if scriptures were an otherwise-complete guide for *all* of life? Are "circumstances" about automobile mechanics governed by scripture, but circumstances regarding worship and church government *not* so governed? Of course not. Rather, this latter clause qualifies the intent of the previous, that "faith and life" are shorthands for the beliefs of the covenant community, and the duties of the covenant community.

Now, the covenant community consists of humans, and it is true that the scriptures also contain information about the created purpose/mandate of the human race in its entirety; so I am not denying that the scriptures contain some general instruction to the human race. I am merely denying that "faith and life" is intended to suggest that scriptures are an adequate guide to the various particulars of our lives and callings as humans. The Bible is sufficient to guide the

human-as-covenanter, but *not* sufficient to guide the human-as-mechanic, the human-as-physician, the human-as businessman, the human-as-parent, the human-as-husband, the human-as-wife, or the human-as-legislator.

Where the big change has occurred in my own thinking has been with regard to the disastrous consequences of the common misunderstanding of the doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture. We appear to have lost the historic Protestant understanding of the importance of Natural Revelation, and have tended to function as though such revelation were not necessary. If anything has changed, then, it is that I would now argue with equal zeal for the *insufficiency* of scripture in other than religious or covenantal areas. I would want to argue now that scripture is *not* a sufficient guide to many aspects of life, other than in the sense of providing religious direction and motivation to all of life. This change has occurred as a result of three considerations; two theological, and one practical.

### *First Consideration: The Biblical Call to Wisdom*

Ours is a profoundly unwise generation. The intrusion of many electronic media have virtually driven contemplation and conversation from most homes. Dr. Samuel Johnson, if alive today, could surely say daily what he said only rarely in the eighteenth century: “There was talk enough, but no conversation.” Surprisingly, however, the Evangelical and Reformed communities have appeared not to have resisted these changes, and most of their critical analyses of media are more concerned with their content than on their influence on the social and home environment.

Whatever the complex reasons that have caused this to be such an unwise generation, I would submit that our erroneous assumptions about the sufficiency of scripture are among them. The biblical literature commends wisdom in the strongest terms:

Buy truth, and do not sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding (Prov. 23:23).

To get wisdom is better than gold; to get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver (Prov. 16:16).

The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight (Prov. 4:7).

Say to wisdom, “You are my sister,” and call insight your intimate friend (Prov. 7:4).

Yet, according to the biblical testimony, how does one acquire wisdom? Well, in part, by heeding God’s commands in holy scripture (Pro. 10:8; Eccl. 12:13). But more commonly,

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Of course, there are several delightful exceptions to this common trend, e.g. Jacques Ellul, *Propoganda. The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*. Translated by Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966; Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*. translated by Joyce Main Hanks. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985; Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace*. 1999 Wipf & Stock; Ken Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture*. Westchester, Ill. : Crossway Books, 1989; C. John Sommerville, *How the News Makes Us Dumb: The Death of Wisdom in an Information Age*. Downers Grove, Ill. : InterVarsity Press, 1999.

wisdom comes from listening to advice (Pro. 12:15; 19:20), from entertaining the opinion of a variety of people (Pro. 11:14; 18:17; 24:6), by listening to older people (Pro. 13:1;), and by observing the natural order itself (Pro. 6:6). Wisdom does not come easily or quickly, but through a lengthy, prolonged effort. Most importantly, it does not come exclusively, or perhaps even primarily, through Bible study. Solomon promotes listening to parents, elders, a variety of counselors, and even a consideration of ants, badgers, locusts, and lizards (Pro. 30:24-28). Nor will we concur with a pietistic interpretation of James's counsel that those who lack wisdom should pray for it (James 1:5), as though such prayer would be answered by some sort of special revelation. Jesus also counsels us to pray for our daily bread, which we do, but we also then labor to acquire bread by ordinary means, and, when successful, we offer prayers of thanks. Similarly, we should pray for wisdom, but then labor for it by the ordinary means by which it is found. We will not acquire wisdom without consulting a variety of points of view, without thinking long and hard about life, without being perceptive. Most importantly, we will not acquire it by simply reading the Bible.

### *Second Consideration: Theonomy's Fundamental Error*

Theonomy, therefore, is not merely an error, though it has manifestly been regarded as erroneous by the Reformed tradition<sup>2</sup>. It is the error *du jour*, the characteristic error of an unwise generation. It is the error of a generation that has abandoned the biblically-mandated quest for wisdom on the assumption that the Bible *itself* contains all that we need to know about life's various enterprises. It is the proof-textual, Bible-thumping, literalist, error *par excellence*. It is not merely the view of the unwise, but the view of the never-to-be-wise, because it is the view of those who wrongly believe that scripture sufficiently governs this arena, and who, for this reason, will never discover in the natural constitution of the human nature or the particular circumstances of given peoples what must be discovered to govern well and wisely.

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"For there are some who deny that a commonwealth is duly framed which neglects the political system of Moses, and is ruled by the common laws of nations. Let other men consider how perilous and seditious this notion is; it will be enough for me to have proved it false and foolish." Calvin, *Institutes*, V.XX.14

"The Constitution of the Church is a Divine revelation; the Constitution of the State must be determined by human reason and the course of providential events. The Church has no right to construct or modify a government for the State, and the State has no right to frame a creed or polity for the Church. They are planets moving in different orbits, and unless each is confined to its own track, the consequences may be as disastrous in the moral world as the collision of different spheres in the world of matter." James Henley Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, IV:449.

"Hence Theocracy is the worst of all governments. If we must have a tyrant, a robber baron is far better than an inquisitor. The baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity at some point be sated; and since he dimly knows he is doing wrong he may possibly repent. But the inquisitor who mistakes his own cruelty and lust of power and fear for the voice of heaven will torment us infinitely, because he torments us with the approval of his own conscience and his better impulses appear to him as temptations. And, since Theocracy is the worst, the nearer any government approaches to Theocracy, the worse it will be." C.S. Lewis, "A Reply to Prof. Haldane, in *On Stories and Other Essays*, pp. 75-76.

Readers interested in my own evaluation of Theonomy are directed to "Critique of Theonomy." *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (Spring, 1994): 23-43.

### *Third Consideration: Mr. Gallup's Discovery of Evangelical Divorces*

The large practical matter that has influenced my thinking about the matter of the sufficiency of scripture has been the publication of findings that the Evangelical divorce rate is roughly the same as that of non-Evangelicals. If we ask why Evangelicals divorce at the same rate as those who do not necessarily recognize the Bible as a source of authoritative guidance, the answer must be something like this: that whereas Scripture teaches us that marriage is a life-long commitment, Scripture is manifestly *not* sufficient to teach people *how* to attain that end. Oh yes, Scripture contains some broad principles, such as those encountered in Ephesians 5 or in Proverbs 29. But for all the Evangelical talk about roles of men and women, such talk has obviously not produced happy or successful marriages. We divorce as frequently as those who do not recognize these divinely-established principles regarding male/female roles, *despite* the fact that we believe divorce is sinful under most circumstances.

It is quite possible that because of our mistaken sense that the Bible is more sufficient than it is, we may falsely assume that men and women who are committed to scripture will have successful marriages on that ground alone; and we do not expend the time, energy, reflection, and discussion necessary to discovering how to make such relationships work. Solomon may well have felt the same way: “Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden” (Prov. 30:18, 19). It is possible that the proverb merely means that these are all wonderful things, but it is more likely that part of the wonder is due to the mysterious nature of these realities: How does the eagle soar so effortlessly? How does a legless serpent move along the rock as he does? How does a frail vessel remain afloat on the seas? And how does a man relate to a woman?

I would suggest that part of the reason our unbelieving friends succeed as often in marriage as we do is that they are never hood-winked by any misunderstanding of the sufficiency of scripture. They are never counseled to “take two Bible pills and call me in the morning.” They know that if a marriage is to work, it will require patience, conversation, reflection, and understanding. It will require that men attempt to understand how and why women function as they do; that women attempt to understand how and why men function as they do; and that individual men and women attempt to understand and why their particular spouses function as they do. And the Bible will answer none of those questions with *sufficient* directives.