

“Most Perfect and Complete”

An Exposition of Article Seven of the Belgic Confession

Article 7 - The Sufficiency of Scripture

We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it.¹ For since the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it at great length, no one²—even an apostle or an angel from heaven, as Paul says—ought to teach other than what the Holy Scriptures have already taught us (Galatians 1:8). For since it is forbidden to add to or subtract from the Word of God (Deuteronomy 12:32),³ this plainly demonstrates that the teaching is perfect and complete in all respects.⁴ Therefore we must not consider human writings—no matter how holy their authors may have been—equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of time or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else.⁵ For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself (Psalm 62:9). Therefore we reject with all our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule,⁶ as we are taught to do by the apostles when they say, “Test the spirits to see if they are of God” (1 John 4:1) and also, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house” (2 John 2:10).

¹ 2 Tim 3:16-17; 1 Pt 1:10-12 ² 1 Cor 15:2; 1 Tim 1:3 ³ Dt 4:2; Prov 30:6; Acts 26:22; 1 Cor 4:6; Rev 22:18-19 ⁴ Ps 19:7; Jn 15:15; Acts 18:28, 20:27; Rom 15:4 ⁵ Mk 7:7-9; Acts 4:19; Col 2:8; 1 Jn 2:19 ⁶ Dt 4:5-6; Is 8:20; 1 Cor 3:11; Eph 4:4-6; 2 Thes 2:2; 2 Tim 3:14-15

Virtually every pseudo-Christian cult and false religion is founded upon the following premise: “Of course, we believe the Bible. But . . . we have additional holy books that no one else has. We receive new revelations from God which you do not have. We have sacred tradition in addition to the Bible. We have an inspired prophet or teacher who interprets the Bible correctly unlike everyone else.” The essence of false religion is this: We believe in the Bible, plus, we have an additional religious authority which corrects or explains what the Bible *really* teaches, or else supplements what the Bible supposedly leaves out.

Article Seven of the Belgic Confession deals with the sufficiency of Holy Scripture. While this article comes at the end of that section of our confession which deals with *sola Scriptura* (Articles Three-Seven), in effect, Article Seven sets out the meaning of the sufficiency of Scripture, and spells out the ramifications of what it means when we as Reformed Christians believe and confess the inspiration, authority, and canonicity of Holy Scripture, God’s word written.

When we speak of the inspiration of Scripture, we are referring to the fact that books of the Bible have their origins in the will of God, not in the will of man. The inspired books of the Bible have been breathed forth by God the Holy Spirit through the agency of various human writers. But this divine-

breathing forth was done in such a way as not to obscure the writer's personality, nor to override the various historical circumstances under which these books were written. While fully inspired, the Bible remains a fully human book.

When we speak of the authority of Holy Scripture (as we saw in Article Five), we mean that the Holy Spirit is Scripture's divine author. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is alone fit to bear witness to the truthfulness and to the divine origin of God's word. The church does not give the Bible its doctrinal authority. Rather, the church can only recognize that authority which Scripture already possesses *because* God breathed it forth. Scripture's divine author not only tells us that Scripture is God's word written, but the Holy Spirit enables sinful people who are prejudiced against God because he is holy, to accept the internal evidence that the Bible is God's word (those verses where Scripture affirms its divine authorship) as well as the voluminous external evidence which supports the factual claims of the Bible. There is so much evidence for the truth of the Bible, our confession states that even a blind person can see it. The problem is because of human sin, people will not bow the knee to God, even when the evidence for the truth of God's word is overwhelming.

When our confession lists the canonical books of the Bible (Article Four) and explains why we as Reformed Christians do not accept the apocryphal books (Article Six), our confession speaks as it does because of some very important historical background. In the years preceding the writing of our confession, during the fourth session of the *Council of Trent* (1546), the Roman Catholic Church issued the first official list of canonical books in the history of the church. By officially declaring the apocryphal books to be Holy Scripture, Rome elevated church authority above that of the word of God. When our confession lists the sixty-six books of the Bible as "canonical" our confession is directly challenging the magisterial authority of the Roman church which sees itself standing over the canon of Scripture.

Also, Article Seven must be understood against the background of the tragedy of the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster, an event which shocked all of Europe. Zealous followers of Melchior Hoffman, including Jan Mattys and John of Leyden, declared that the Holy Spirit revealed to them that the end of the world was at hand and the city of Münster was to be the New Jerusalem, that holy site where the millennial age would dawn. After the kingdom of Münster was crushed by local armies and John of Leyden and many of his followers killed, the havoc wrought by these Anabaptist radicals gave Rome an excuse to suppress the burgeoning Protestant movement with the sword. When our confession rejects Rome's authority (indeed Rome's self-professed *right*) to determine the canon of Holy Scripture, great care is exercised to argue that we as Reformed Christians do not reject the normative authority of Scripture as the Anabaptists had done. Since the Holy Spirit speaks in through his word, it is important that our confession affirm Scripture's normative authority, while at the same time distancing itself from the Anabaptist's assertion that the Spirit speaks to people apart from Holy Scripture.

On a practical basis, the issues with which our confession is dealing are as follows. Rome's view is that Scripture and tradition serve as dual authorities, which, in practice, means that all kinds of unbiblical things (the miraculous conception and assumption of the Virgin, for example) can be taught in the name of church tradition, even if the Bible does not teach such things, indeed implicitly contradicts such teaching.

The Anabaptists, on the other hand, rejected Scripture's normative authority in arguing that the Holy Spirit speaks to especially pious individuals apart from the word of God written. Did the Holy Spirit really lead John of Leyden to run naked through the streets of Münster, take sixteen wives, and to kill all

the ungodly people who did not accept his kingship?

In affirming the principle of *sola Scriptura* and carefully defining the inspiration, authority and canonicity of Holy Scripture, our fathers in the faith rejected Rome's view that the authority of the church precedes and establishes the authority of Scripture and that the authority of church tradition equals (or exceeds) the authority of Scripture. They also rejected the Anabaptist notion that the Bible does not contain all that Christians need to know and that God must supplement the Bible with direct revelation from the Holy Spirit. This historical background must be kept in mind when we come to the final article on Scripture (Article Seven) which lays out the theological significance as well as the consequences of believing and confessing *sola Scriptura* before the unbelieving world.

Article Seven is titled "the sufficiency of Holy Scripture" and is divided into two sections. The first deals with the definition of the sufficiency of Scripture while the second deals with the practical ramifications of the Reformed understanding of *sola Scriptura*.

The first part of our confession reads as follows: "We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it. For since the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it at great length, no one—even an apostle or an angel from heaven, as Paul says—ought to teach other than what the Holy Scriptures have already taught us (Galatians 1:8). For since it is forbidden to add to or subtract from the Word of God (Deuteronomy 12:32), this plainly demonstrates that the teaching is perfect and complete in all respects."

When we speak of Scripture as "sufficient," we do not mean that the Bible teaches us everything, nor was it intended to. The Bible was given for a very specific purpose—to set forth (as in the first line of the Confession), "the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it." Here, we consider two important passages; one in the Old Testament in which the Ten Commandments are set forth (Exodus 20), while the second comes from the New Testament, in which we find Paul's precise definition of the gospel as stated 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. The Bible and the Bible alone contains the law and the gospel. Because the Bible contains both, we have all we need to worship God correctly, since only justified sinners, cleansed by the blood of Christ and clothed in his perfect righteousness, are free to approach the Holy God with thankful hearts, and to worship him according to the manner he prescribes in his word.

While the law is written upon our hearts by virtue of our being created in God's image, and because God placed our father, Adam, under a covenant of works in Eden, the Ten Commandments re-state and codify the terms of that original covenant which God made with the federal head and biological father of the human race. While the moral law is universal (it is written upon every human heart), only in the Bible do we find that law written on two tables of stone, now codified in writing, so that God's will is perfectly clear to all. As we have emphasized in our discussion of revelation, inspiration and authority, the gospel is not found in nature. While the beauty and wonder of creation powerfully points us to the Creator—so much so that we cannot deny God's existence—the story of God's saving work to rescue sinners through the person and work of Jesus Christ is not written in the beauty of mountain peaks, nor is it found in the awesome crashing of the seas. The only place where we will find the gospel is in the word of God written—the Bible.

If the Bible is the only place where we can find the law and the gospel, what else could we possibly need to know about how to worship God correctly, and how to be delivered from the guilt and power of sin that God has not already told us in his word? Do we need church tradition to clarify the gospel so that

we can now see the Virgin Mary's role as a co-redemptrix? Do we need church tradition to tell us that we are justified by faith and by works? Do we need additional "holy books," like the Book of Mormon, which identifies itself as "another testament of Jesus"? Do we need a prophet, seer and revelator like the Mormons possess? Do we need new revelation from the Holy Spirit to supplement the Bible as certain Pentecostals advocate? This is why our confession goes on to cite Paul's warning from Galatians 1:6-9: *"It is therefore unlawful for any one, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in Holy Scripture: yes, even if it be an angel from heaven, as the apostle Paul says."*

When we speak, then, of the sufficiency of Holy Scripture, we simply mean that Scripture alone contains the law and the gospel. In these two words, we have all that we need to know God's will, to come face to face with our sinfulness, and to discover how God saves us from our sins. We also have all the information we need to worship God in a way which pleases him. The Bible was not given to satisfy sinful human curiosity. We do not find the answers to all of the mysteries of life in the Bible. God does not reveal all the secrets of his providence. In the Bible we find the story of our redemption, as revealed in the law and the gospel, which unfold in the covenant of works made in Eden and restated in the Ten Commandments and through the various administrations of the covenant of grace in which we witness Jesus save us from our sins in the type and shadow of the Old Testament and in the promise and fulfillment of the new.

As one writer reminds us, those looking for esoterica (hidden things) had better look somewhere else than in Holy Scripture. But those who want to know God, "his purpose for mankind and the meaning of history, salvation in Christ, and the reality of the kingdom of God" will find what they are looking for.¹ Those who come to the Bible looking for something other than the story of God saving sinners will not find it. Nor did God give us his word to answer the objections of sinful rebels to the way in which God has decided to order and govern his universe. God did not give the Bible to justify his actions. After all, who are we as sinners to demand that the Holy God give an account to us? No, in the Bible we find the will of God and the person and work of Jesus Christ in all his saving glory and mercy. What else could we possibly need that God has not already given to us?

This is why we should not trivialize the Bible as some do by speaking of it as an "owners manual to life," given by God to help us live a successful, happy, and prosperous life. The Bible was given through the inspiration of God to show us our sin and the wonders of his grace. Now, there's no doubt that those who obey God's commandments will receive those temporal blessings promised in his word, as well as escape many of the consequences of our sins. But the Bible was never given to give prosperous, self-absorbed, lazy Americans a justification of the pursuit of pleasure, celebrity, and power. The Bible was never given to tickle our ears, to teach the formulas for a successful business, to reveal the secrets of the universe, or to provide us with timeless moral principles, which, like Aesop's fables, will help us all live at peace with each other.

Because the Bible contains everything we need to know to be saved, our confession states the obvious: "it is forbidden to add to or subtract from the Word of God" (citing from Deuteronomy 12:32), "this plainly demonstrates that the teaching is perfect and complete in all respects." In light of this, a couple of things need to be pointed out regarding the title given the article, "The Sufficiency of Scripture."

¹ Osterhaven, Our Confession of Faith, 47-48.

The phrase “fully contains” is translated from the French, *parfaitment*, meaning “perfect” or “complete.”² There is nothing left out of God’s word—everything we need to be saved is found therein. The Dutch version of the confession uses the word for “completeness.” Since the Bible is complete, it lacks nothing when it comes to revealing the will of God, nor what we must do to be saved. This is what we mean when we speak of the sufficiency of Scripture. What can church tradition tell us about our sin or God’s salvation that we don’t already know? What can the Holy Spirit tell us about the law and the gospel that he hasn’t already breathed forth through the means of “men moved of God”? The answer is nothing.

Therefore, whenever someone claims to possess the secret teachings of Jesus, or claims to have a “word from the Lord” not found written in the Holy Scripture, or who claims to hear God speak to them directly, sadly, they are either lying or self-deceived. It is as simple as that. God has spoken in his word, and this word contains all that we need to know about God’s will (the law), how we can be saved (the gospel) and how God ought to be worshiped. This is why Scripture repeatedly warns us about people “adding to” or “taking away” from what God has already said. It is serious business to claim to speak for God and to add to or detract from sacred Scripture. If we believe and confess that the Scriptures are complete, then we must also believe and confess that no one can add to or take away from them.

The second part of Article Seven of our confession deals with some of the consequences of believing and confessing *sola Scriptura*. The second part of article seven of our confession reads as follows.

Therefore we must not consider human writings—no matter how holy their authors may have been—equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of time or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else. For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself (Psalm 62:9). Therefore we reject with all our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule, as we are taught to do by the apostles when they say, “Test the spirits to see if they are of God” (1 John 4:1) and also, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house” (2 John 2:10)

If the Bible alone has its origins in the will of God, not in the will of men, then the Bible alone comes to us as God-breathed and with the full authority of its author. In the Bible, God speaks, and we listen. No other book has such an authority. All other writings, no matter how wise, eloquent, insightful, and so on, they may be, should not be elevated to the status of sacred writ.

Here is where we as Reformed Christians need to exercise a bit of caution. The writings of John Calvin (substitute any other Reformed writer you may think of) are wise, pious, and very faithful to Holy Scripture. But Calvin was (as is any other Reformed writer) a sinner and fallible. Calvin’s writings are to be evaluated in light of God’s word, not vice-versa. The same thing must be said regarding our confessions. We believe and confess the doctrines set forth in the Belgic Confession only insofar as our confession is faithful to Holy Scripture—either in quoting directly from the biblical text, or else summarizing the biblical text, which is why the footnotes which point us to those biblical passages are such a vital part of the confession. As you learn to read and study the Reformed confessions, make sure that the biblical texts upon which they are based, are an integral part of your studies. After all, this is what our confession itself teaches us to believe and confess—that Scripture alone is inspired, authoritative and sufficient, not our confession!

² Osterhaven, Our Confession of Faith, 49; Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 64.

In light of the fact that the Bible's authority is above all human writings (at least when it comes to the law and the gospel—those subjects to which the Bible is intended to speak with God's authority), there are a number of erroneous categories used by people to circumvent the Bible's authority. Our confession summarizes them as follows: "Therefore we must not consider human writings—no matter how holy their authors may have been—equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of time or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else."

When our confession places custom beneath the Scriptures, this simply means that those who argue, "well, we've always believed x, y and z, so why change now?" cannot justify doing so when these customs conflict with God's word written. Bad habits might be hard to break, but they are still bad habits nonetheless.

One place where the difference between Protestant and Catholics regarding "custom" can be easily seen, is in the following quote from Cardinal Newman's essay, *Development of Christian Doctrine*, when Newman spells out how pagan customs, supposedly, can be taken over and sanctified by the church. Writes Newman: "Temples, incense, lamps, candles, votive offerings, holy water, holy days and seasons, processions, blessing of the fields, sacerdotal vestments, the tonsure, turning to the East, images—all are of pagan origin, and sanctified by adoption into the church."³ Pagan customs cannot be sanctified by the church, because these things conflict with what God forbids in his word. The church has no power to "sanctify" things condemned by the law.

Neither can someone circumvent the authority of Scripture by appealing to "the great majority," i.e., "majority rules." In a democracy such as ours, especially given our love of public opinion polls, it is commonplace for people to determine their core beliefs based upon the views held by the majority. If opinion polls demonstrate that most people think "good people go to heaven" (and the vast majority of polls show that they do), then Americans willingly embrace universal salvation and regard anyone who rejects such a view as a narrow-minded fundamentalist—even though the Bible clearly teaches that all those who do not trust in Jesus Christ will perish eternally. That the opinions of "the great multitude" have become the basis for many evangelical doctrines and practices can be seen in the fact that evangelicals regard Barna polls (a well-known polling firm) almost as a prophet. Whenever a Barna poll identifies something that many evangelicals believe or discovers a "felt need" that a significant number of them might have, these things are often elevated to the status of official doctrine and become accepted practice and the churches who look to these polls to find out what they should believe will move heaven and earth to provide such people with what they want.

Next, our confession mentions the antiquity of a particular teaching. This one is usually lost on us, since, in this culture, something more than twenty years old is regarded as ancient. Nevertheless, an opinion contrary to God's word is not true simply because it predates Christianity. The argument from antiquity usually surfaces in debates with Eastern Religions and New Age spirituality. But this just means that people have been wrong about something for a very long time.

The next series of items mentioned as authorities inferior to Scripture are those championed by Roman Catholics at the time De Bres wrote our confession: "succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes." When our confession speaks of succession of times and persons, it is referring to

³ Cited in Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, 69-70.

the Roman Catholic notion of apostolic succession—i.e., there is a direct and unbroken line of popes from the current pope all the way back to the apostle Peter. If true, this means that all those who are not ordained by the Roman Church and all those church bodies not in union with Rome, are thereby cut-off from this unbroken line of succession, and their ministerial office is not valid, nor are their sacraments fully valid. Suffice to say, this unbroken apostolic succession is simply not true.

For one thing, Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles, not Peter. Between AD 251-1328, there were no less than 39 “anti-popes” (popes who were elected in a non-canonical way through deceit or internal intrigue). From 1376-1417 there were two and at times three rival popes serving at the same time, each with lines of apostolic succession and a supposedly valid claim to the office.⁴ One pope, Honorius I, was anathematized by both his successor and a church council for being a heretic, for something he supposedly taught infallibly. And we could go on and on. The point is that Rome uses apostolic succession as a means to circumvent the authority of Holy Scripture, because apostolic succession, as Rome understands it, gives the church apostolic authority, above the word of God written. But apostolic succession cannot be used as an end-run around the authority of Scripture. As Calvin taught us, what is historic and unbroken is not a chain of successive popes, but the doctrine taught in holy Scripture.

When De Bres mentions “councils, decrees, or official decisions,” as rivals to the authority of Scripture, he is referring to the so-called ecumenical councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), and those of Constantinople in 553 and 680. But Rome also regards as authoritative the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which anathematized Paul’s doctrine of justification *sola fide*, Vatican I (promulgated in 1869) which affirmed papal infallibility and the immaculate conception of Mary, as authoritative, as well as Vatican II (1962-63). While Protestants have historically held these ecumenical councils and the creeds which come from them in high regard—the Apostle’s, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed and the Formula of Chalcedon—indeed, we confess one of them each Lord’s day and regard them as doctrinal standards in our churches, these councils and the creeds which come from them, do not possess the authority of Holy Scripture. These documents are authoritative, only insofar as they reflect the teaching of Scripture. Scripture stands above all Christian creeds and certainly Christian councils should likewise submit to the authority of God’s word, a point Rome certainly does not accept.

Why is it that our confession views “custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of time or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God” with such suspicion? The reason is simple. All other religious writings must be corrected by Holy Scripture because of human sinfulness. As our confession puts it: “all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself (Psalm 62:9).” God alone is holy. He alone is able to speak with divine authority. God alone speaks without error. As the Psalmist declares (Psalm 116:11), “*all men are liars.*” This is why God’s word must stand above custom, the consent of the majority, great antiquity, and especially above the authority of the church, and its creeds and councils. The church is not infallible. The church is filled with sinners and her decisions and doctrinal pronouncements are true and possess authority only as they conform to Holy Scripture.

Given our view of the inspiration, authority and sufficiency of Holy Scripture, how then are we to respond to those who reject Scripture’s sufficiency and therefore its normative authority?

Here we are not left in the dark, since the Scriptures speak directly to this point, and are summarized in

⁴ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 69.

the closing lines of Article Seven: “Therefore we reject with all our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule,⁶ as we are taught to do by the apostles when they say, “Test the spirits to see if they are of God” (1 John 4:1) and also, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house” (2 John 2:10).”

While we have little trouble understanding John’s command in 1 John 4:1 to test all things in the light of Holy Scripture, it is a bit more difficult to know what to do with John’s exhortation not to greet nor welcome false teachers. By this John doesn’t mean that we should be rude and inhospitable to people. We are to love our enemies, after all. It is not a sin to invite a Mormon missionary into your house to share the gospel with him. Giving him a cup of cold water might even be the Christian thing to do. But John does mean that we should avoid doing anything to give false teachers any kind of legitimacy—i.e. the kind of welcome which appears to implicitly endorse their teaching, such as the kiss of peace, or welcoming them into our homes in such a way as to appear to welcome them as we would a fellow brother or sister in Christ. There are certain cultural things in view here which explain John’s meaning. In John’s day welcoming someone into your dwelling was usually done so as to share a meal, which was symbolic not only of friendship but of agreement. To eat with a false teacher and give them the kiss of peace was to say, “you are one of us.” Such is not necessarily the case today.

The point is we should never give people who think that God’s word needs to be corrected or supplemented any credence in the church, nor should we give them any forum to spread their views. We don’t let them recruit in our Sunday school, we don’t let them stand up and give “words of knowledge” or speak in tongues during our worship service, we wouldn’t let our spouse or one of our children go to one of their meetings, we don’t let them into our homes for the purpose of giving them a hearing, unless we are prepared to refute their views and expose their errors. We don’t listen to cult leaders and false teachers in the media or read their blogs and books—unless to gain knowledge of their views so as to refute them. We must not give those who deny the sufficiency of Scripture a forum to correct or add to God’s word. To do anything which gives a false teacher credence and legitimacy only confuses people within the church as well as hinder our confession to those outside the church. Simply put, we must not allow or do anything which compromises the inspiration, authority, nor the sufficiency of Scripture.

What we must believe and confess before the watching world is that God has spoken in the pages of Holy Scripture, but only in the pages of Holy Scripture. Because in the Bible we have both the law and gospel, we need nothing else which God has not already given that church tradition or a prophet can provide. The Bible is most complete and perfect, it leaves nothing out. It tells us all we need to know about God’s will, our sin, God’s salvation in Jesus Christ, and how God wishes to be worshiped. And having all these things in God’s word written, “We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it. For since the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it at great length.”