

“Even the Blind Are Able to See”

Sermon on Article Five of the Belgic Confession.

Texts: Jeremiah 23:16-32; Matthew 4:1-11

Article 5 - The Authority of Holy Scripture

We receive¹ all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.² We believe without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God,³ and also because they contain the evidence thereof in themselves; for, even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled.⁴

¹ 1 Thes 2:13 ² 2 Tim 3:16-17 ³ 1 Cor 12:3; 1 Jn 4:6, 5:7 ⁴ Dt 18:21-22; 1 Kgs 22:28; Jer 28:9; Ezek 33:33

John Calvin once declared: “The Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard.”¹ Since the Bible comes to us from the hand of God, through the agency of men inspired by the Holy Spirit, when we read the Bible or hear it read aloud, we can be assured that God himself is speaking to us. The Bible is God’s word and the same Holy Spirit who breathed it forth, also assures us that the words of Holy Scripture are the very words of God.

We now skip ahead to article five of our confession which deals with the authority of Scripture.² But why skip over article four which lists the canonical books of the Bible? The reason is a practical one. Recall that in article three our confession deals with the subject of the inspiration of Scripture. Scripture has its origin not in the will of men, but in the will of God. It is God who breathes forth his word (the Bible) through the agency of human writers without sublimating their individual personalities or negating the historical circumstances under which these books were written. This is what our confession means in article three when it speaks of God’s revealed word being committed to writing.

Since Scripture is God-breathed, it is suitable for religious purposes, i.e., teaching, correction and training in righteousness. Only in the Bible do we find the will of God fully revealed (the law) and only in the Bible do we find God’s means of rescuing sinners from the guilt and power of their sins (the gospel). While in nature we see nature’s God, we do not learn of the gospel by contemplating the beauty of a sunset. The gospel is only revealed in God’s word written. This is why we as Christians have a sure and certain knowledge of God and of his will (unlike the secularists), and why we base neither our doctrines nor our practices upon the mere opinions of men (the essence of all false religion). God has

¹ Calvin, Institutes, I.vii.1.

² Or better, the witness of the Holy Spirit to authority of Scripture. Cf. Osterhaven, Our Confession of Faith, p. 41.

spoken to us in his word and we must listen to what he says.

The divine origin of Holy Scripture is what separates Paul's letter to the church in Galatia from his grocery list. Scripture has its origin in the will of God, while Paul's grocery list does not. Because God breathes forth Scripture, on that basis alone the various books of the Bible are rendered "canonical." Since God breathes forth Scripture for the express purpose of speaking authoritatively to his people, this necessitates the collection and circulation of these writings. This explains why the subjects of inspiration, authority, sufficiency and canonicity are so intimately connected and why articles three-seven of our confession are set forth in the order in which we find them. If we talk about the origin of Scripture, we must then identify which writings have their origin in the will of God. If we speak of inspiration, we must speak of canon.

According to the testimony of both Paul (2 Timothy 3:16) and Peter (2 Peter 1:18-21) the inspiration of Scripture extends to the entire Old Testament (the *graphe* and the *grammata*). This raises the question of the extent of the canon of the Old Testament, since one group of Jews (those centered in Palestine) accepted the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament as Protestants do currently, while another group of Jews (diaspora Jews, centered primarily in Alexandria, Egypt), recognized a canon of sacred books composed of the canonical books along with the fourteen non-canonical books, commonly known as the Apocrypha. This larger canon is also affirmed by the Roman Catholic Church, which Rome uses to justify doctrines such as prayer for the dead as well as erroneous conceptions of angels and demons.

Not only is the subject of canon important when considering the canon of the Old Testament, the matter also extends to the New Testament as well, since Jesus himself told his disciples on two occasions that additional revelation is yet to come. In John 14:26, Jesus declares, "*But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*" Then shortly thereafter, Jesus states in John 16:12-15,

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.

At the very least, these statements from our Lord imply that new revelation will be given which will later take the form of what we now know as the New Testament.

Indeed, once Christian churches are established throughout the Roman empire, the need arises for the gospels and epistles to be read aloud in the churches. But what books should be read? What books came through the means Jesus described in John's gospel? Only those known to be given under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. When Guido De Bres wrote the *Belgic Confession* in 1561, a number of Anabaptists were claiming to be receiving continuing revelation from the Holy Spirit, which on a practical level were put on a par with the New Testament. This why the identity of the canon and the sufficiency of Scripture take on such a prominent role in the opening articles of our confession. Were the canonical books of the Bible enough, or must we accept Rome's expanded canon and stress upon tradition as a dual source for doctrine and practice? Must we accept the words of religious fanatics, who claimed that God was still speaking directly to them? Thus the subject of canon is as practical today as it was in De Bres' age, and just as it was in the New Testament era.

The bottom line is this—you cannot talk about the inspiration of Scripture without discussing the extent of the canon. But neither can you talk about inspiration without talking about the authority of Scripture and the way in which it is authenticated to us, as we find in article five. Clearly, article four of the *Belgic Confession* logically follows after the inspiration of Scripture. But since our confession discusses the canon and the apocryphal books in two separate articles (four and six), for the sake of clarity, we will take up the subject of the canon next time, when we work our way through both articles. But all of these matters are clearly related and you cannot talk about the one without talking about the others.

Article five of our confession, entitled, “the authority of Holy Scripture,” deals with three closely related issues. The first issue is reflected in the title of the article, the authority of those writings breathed forth by God, while the second has to do with the means by which we know that these writings come to us through the self-revelation of God. As to the second matter, the same blessed Holy Spirit who breathed forth these writings bears witness to us that the canonical books did, in fact, have their origins in the will of God. Finally, the confession addresses the so-called internal testimony of Scripture and those external evidences by which we know on a factual basis that the Bible is the word of God.

Article 5 of our confession reads as follows: “We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith. We believe without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they contain the evidence thereof in themselves; for, even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled.”

The first matter dealt with in our confession is the nature of the authority of those books breathed forth—identified for us in article four as the sixty-six books in our Bibles. Because these writings have their origin in the will of God and have been breathed forth by God through the agency of their human writers, these books and only these books have three very specific functions: the “regulation, foundation and confirmation of our faith.” Herein we have affirmed in a nutshell the essence of Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. By this we mean (positively) that all doctrines we believe and confess must be based upon the clear teaching of Scripture and that (negatively) we cannot bind people’s consciences to things which are not taught in the Bible. Reformed Christians should base no doctrine on church tradition, human opinion, or supposed new revelations from God, but only on the word of God written. This means that our confession of faith is authoritative only in so far as it reflects and summarizes the clear teaching of Scripture—a point which is particularly germane when we use our confession as the basis for a sermon series. We believe and confess those things set forth in our confession, only because and only insofar as, they are taken directly from Holy Scripture.

As to the first of these specifics mentioned by our confession, which is the regulation of our faith, in 2 Timothy 3:16, we have already seen that Paul clearly connects Scripture’s divine origin to its regulative function—rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. It is the Bible that regulates (or determines) what we are to believe about those matters which God addresses in his word. Furthermore the Bible is said to be the foundation of our faith, in the sense that the law and the gospel can only be found in God’s word, not in nature, nor in human opinion. Take away the Bible, and as Calvin once put it “there will be no faith left.”³ Why, because only in the Bible do we find the object of our faith, which is the person and work of Jesus Christ. Without God’s revelation of his son and his saving purposes in his word, there

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.6.

could be no such thing as saving faith, since saving faith can only arise in connection with the preaching of the gospel. Because we have the sure and certain word of God written, we need not fall prey to cleverly devised fables, tales, legends and myths, all of which direct us away from the truth.⁴

When our confession speaks of the Bible as confirming our faith, we are reminded of the words of Hebrews 4:12, “*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*” The Bible is not like other religious books, which merely reflects the opinions and religious aspirations of their authors. Owing its origins to the will of God and not the will of men, the Bible is a living book, able to cut to pieces, because the living God speaks through it. The same Holy Spirit who inspired Holy Scripture, still speaks in the Bible, rendering it a living and active book. But the Holy Spirit also confirms the Bible’s divine origin to us whenever it is read.

This brings us to the second issue addressed by our confession, namely that the Scriptures are authenticated as such not by the church, but by their divine author—the Holy Spirit. What we mean by this assertion is that God speaks through his word in such a way as to confirm that the Scripture comes from him. As Scripture’s divine author, God authenticates the Bible as his word written. This is what we mean when we speak of Scripture as self-authenticating.

The historical background to our confession’s statement about the self-authentication of Scripture is the Roman Catholic Church’s insistence that the authority of the church logically and historically precedes the authority of Scripture. This was a very significant point at the time of the Reformation, because so many of Rome’s erroneous doctrines were based upon church tradition, rather than on God’s word. It wasn’t so much that Luther re-discovered doctrines found in the Bible, it was that Luther dared challenge the authority of the Pope and the traditions of the church using these rediscovered doctrines. According to Rome, the church determines the extent of the canon through ecclesiastical declaration, because the church’s authority is before and above Scripture.⁵ But since God inspires Holy Scripture, he alone is fit to bear witness to its divine origin and therefore its divine authority. It is Christ of Scripture who founds the church. The assent of the church to Scripture does not give Scripture its divine authority. Rather, the church can only recognize what Scripture already is—authoritative because God has breathed it forth.

There are several assertions in Scripture about its own self-authentication. In John 10:27, Jesus stated “*my sheep hear my voice.*” In John 8:47, Jesus declares to the pharisees, “*He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.*” Where do we hear God’s voice? We heard God’s voice in his word. In Romans 8:16, Paul writes, “*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.*” How does the Spirit do this? According to Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:12-14,

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

⁴ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, p. 50.

⁵ DeJong, The Church’s Witness to the World, p. 131.

The Holy Spirit not only bears witness to us that we are Christians, he also authenticates Scripture (spiritual words) to us, because he is Scripture's divine author.

This subjective (or personal) witness of the Holy Spirit to the authenticity of Scripture does not take place in a vacuum. The Holy Spirit bears witness to the facts of revelation. Our confession puts it this way: "[the Scriptures] contain the evidence [for their inspiration] in themselves; for, even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled." The evidence for the inspiration of Scripture takes two forms, evidence within the Scripture itself (Scripture's testimony about itself), and evidence external to Scripture (factual evidence which supports the Bible's claims). Since Scripture contains the account of God's redemptive acts (Adam and Eve, the covenant with Abraham, the Exodus from Egypt, the cross of Jesus Christ, as well as God's explanation of the meaning of these events) Scripture is necessarily grounded in the facts of history. The things recorded in the Bible are true, in the sense that the events mentioned in the Bible actually occurred in human history. If they didn't occur, the Bible is bearing false witness. When our confession contends that even blind people can see the truth of the Bible, this means that the reason why people do not believe what it says or submit to its authority, stems *not* from a lack of evidence. On the contrary, people know the Bible is God's word *because* of the great evidence for it. Yet, they remain blind to the light the Bible contains because they want to. As Jesus once put it, "people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil" (John 3:19).

While the factual nature of the Bible and evidences supporting the truth of the Bible are by themselves insufficient to bring someone to saving faith, nevertheless the witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of the Bible does not add some new evidence to the truth of the Bible which miraculously causes people to accept the Bible as God's word. Rather, the Holy Spirit bears witness to the factual truth of the Bible in and through and the sufficient evidences which God has already graciously given. As B. B. Warfield points out, the Holy Spirit must enable us to accept the sufficient evidence for the truth of the Bible as coming from God, because otherwise human sinfulness will prejudicially prevent us from accepting these evidences as sufficient.⁶ In other words, it is not as though people lack sufficient reason to believe. They do not want to believe, even though the evidence tells them that they should. Until the Holy Spirit changes the human heart, the evidences for the truth of the inspiration of Scripture will remain absolutely ineffective. As Calvin once put it, "those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly, for only by faith can this be known."⁷

But immediately after affirming this point, Calvin goes on to list both the internal and external evidence for the truth of the Bible because this evidence not only helps us overcome any doubts we may have, it also shuts the mouths of those who oppose the Christian faith.⁸ Indeed, the catalogue of Christian evidences is so extensive that we could spend hours upon hours detailing them. There is the historical evidence for Christ's resurrection. There are over three hundred messianic prophecies in the Old Testament fulfilled in Jesus Christ. There is the archeological evidence which consistently and universally points toward the historicity of even the most disputed of events in Scripture. Then, there is the amazing unity and agreement of the sixty-six books of the Bible, even though they were written over a fifteen hundred year span by various authors. We could go on and on. There is enough factual

⁶ B. B. Warfield, "Introduction to Beattie's Apologetics," in Selected Shorter Writings, ed. John Meeter, Vol. 2 (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), pp. 94-99.

⁷ Calvin, Institutes, I.viii.13.

⁸ Calvin, Institutes, I.ix.1-13.

evidence for the truth of the Bible that a blind person can see it. But until the Spirit makes someone willing to accept what the evidence tells them, they will not believe. They'd rather be blind.

When our confession speaks of Scripture as containing the evidence for their inspiration within, we are referring to Scripture's own testimony about itself. There are a number of important assertions about the nature of Scripture found in the Old Testament, and it is certainly useful to consider them:

(1) Scripture is Effectual:

"So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

(2) Scripture is Eternal:

"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

(3) Scripture is the guide for life:

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105).

(4) Scripture is Infallible:

"God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change His mind. Does He speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23:19); *The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous*" (Psalm 19:9).

(5) Scripture is True:

"Your righteousness is everlasting and your law is true" (Psalm 119:142); *"Yet you are near, O LORD, and all your commands are true"* (Psalm 119:151); *"All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal"* (Psalm 119:160).

(6) Scripture is Perfect:

"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul" (Psalm 19:7); *"Who can discern His errors? Forgive my hidden faults."* (Psalm 19:12).

(7) Scripture is Powerful:

"Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29). This text was part of our Old Testament lesson and Jeremiah's contrast between those who claimed to be prophets and YHWH, whose word is a hammer, is crystal clear. God's word is a hammer because in it he speaks. The words of the false prophets, on the other hand, have their origins in the will of men. God will crush them.

(8) Scripture is the source of wisdom:

"The entrance of your words give light; it gives understanding to the simple" (Psalm 119:130).

(9) Scripture is Absolutely Trustworthy:

“Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to His words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar” (Proverbs 30:5-6).

(10) Scripture is Unchanging:

“Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens” (Psalm 119:89).

These are rather remarkable assertions. But perhaps the most important aspect of this self-authentication of the Bible is Jesus’ own view of Scripture.⁹ How did Jesus view the Old Testament? Did he see it as the authoritative word of God? Absolutely.

For one thing, Jesus refers to the Old Testament as the word of God (*logon tou Theu*) in a number of verses (Matthew 15:6, Mark 7:13, John 10:35). These Old Testament Scriptures, the *graphe*, “cannot be broken,” (John 10:35)¹⁰ and are “truth” (*aletheia*) (John 17:17). They are to be seen to be without error in all matters which they speak (cf. Matthew 22:29 for example).

Second, Jesus affirms the Old Testament to be the very words of God. In Matthew 4:1-11, when Jesus is tempted by Satan, Jesus responds to the devil: “*Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word (rhemati)*¹¹ that comes from the mouth of God (v. 4).” In John’s Gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying that “*I gave them the words (rhemata) that you [the Father] gave me.*” It is clear, that for Jesus, inspiration extends to the words themselves. The Old Testament, as well as that which Jesus speaks, are the called “words of God.” In fact, in Matthew 7:26-29, Jesus equates his words with those of God. In this context, Jesus declares that “*all authority in heaven and earth has been given to [me]*” (Matthew 28:18). In fact, because Jesus speaks the words that the Father has given to him, “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away*” (Matthew. 24:35). Thus, for Jesus, both the Old Testament and his own words, are truth and the very words of God.

Third, Jesus affirms that the word of God cannot be revoked (Matthew 5:18; Luke 16:17; Luke 24:44), and that the Bible therefore, has final authority in all matters of doctrine (Matthew 4:4,7,10; Matthew 21:42, Mark 11:17). In many texts Jesus uses the [γέγραπται - *gegraptai*] formula - “it is written.” As Wenham notes, “there is a grand and solid objectivity about the perfect tense...`Here,’ Jesus was saying, `is the permanent, unchangeable witness of the eternal God, committed to writing for our instruction.’”¹² According to Wenham,

divine authority is clearly implied in the expression *gegraptai*...already mentioned in connection with the temptations, but often used at other times (Matthew 11:10; 21:13; 26:24; Mark 9:12, 13;

⁹ One of the best treatments of this is J. W. Wenham’s essay, “Christ’s View of Scripture” in Geisler, Inerrancy. Another significant work is R. T. France, Jesus and the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982).

¹⁰ The Greek term here, *luthanai* is an aorist passive infinitive of the verb *luo* meaning “to break, nullify or set aside.” See BAG, s. v. “*Luo*”.

¹¹ *Rhema* is a divine or prophetic word and can be used of the Scriptures. See BAG, s. v. “*Rhema*”.

¹² J. W. Wenham, “Christ’s View of Scripture,” in Geisler, Inerrancy, p. 15

11:17; 14:21, 27; Luke 7:27; 19:46). The inspiration and authority implied by these various phrases is applied not only to oracular, prophetic utterances but to all parts of Scripture without discrimination - to history, to laws, to psalms, to prophecies.¹³

According to Jesus, the Old Testament is the authoritative word of God because these words have been breathed forth by God.

Fourth, of great importance for our discussion, are Jesus' affirmations about various events of Old Testament history, frequently treated with ridicule. Jesus affirms the historicity of Jonah (Matthew 12:40), the historicity of Adam and the Genesis account (Matthew 19:4) and the historicity of Noah and the flood (Matthew. 24:37-39). Jesus clearly views Jonah, Adam and Noah as historical individuals and teaches that the events associated with these men really occurred. Is Jesus right about this, or, is he, as some of the liberals say, accommodating himself to his poor dumb audience who didn't know that these things were myths? This was Warfield's point mentioned previously.

We believe this doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures primarily because it is the doctrine which Christ and his apostles believed, and which they have taught us. It may sometimes seem difficult to take our stand frankly by the side of Christ and his apostles. It will always be found to be safe.¹⁴

Suffice to say, the Bible affirms itself to be the authoritative, infallible and inerrant word of God. The internal and external evidence confirms this to be true. This is why our confession states, "we receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith. We believe without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they contain the evidence thereof in themselves; for, even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled." This not only summarizes what the Bible says about itself, and which is confirmed by overwhelming historical evidence, but this is the same view of Scripture believed and taught by Jesus. It is also the view of Scripture we must believe and confess to the unbelieving world around us. For "*the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.*" Amen!

¹³ J. W. Wenham, "Christ's View of Scripture," in Geisler, Inerrancy, p. 21.

¹⁴ Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, p. 128.