

The Sufficiency of Scripture and Contemporary Revelation¹

Part 1

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Earlier this year, I had a dream. Unusually for me, I remembered it in some detail. I was in a church building. A service was taking place. A friend was dishing out porridge during the service. However, we had no spoons, so we had to eat it with our hands.

I relayed the details of my dream to two friends, both of whom are ministers, and asked, tongue-in-cheek, for an interpretation. One replied with something equally tongue-in-cheek. The other, however, took it seriously and treated it as a possible message from God. As I read his reply, I had that kind of sick feeling when you realise not only has your friend taken leave of his senses, he clearly assumes you have too!

Of course, it's easy to make fun, but this kind of response seems to be increasingly common. All kinds of personal experiences, which previously would have been dismissed as nonsense (or at least treated with caution) by most evangelicals, are now being loaded with spiritual significance.

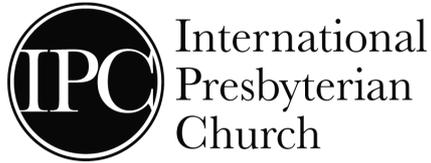
Why is this? At least two cultural factors are at work:

1. The culture's worship of the subjective. Only feelings and impressions are truly authentic. The idea that there might be any objective truth or standard by which we ought to examine and critique our feelings and impressions is rejected. It is rejected as being oppressive and unwarranted.

2. The culture's worship of anything new. Into this culture and against this culture speaks the Bible. So, with respect to the first point, the Bible is like an immovable rock in a swirling sea of subjectivism. Its unbending, objective truth claims about God and humankind do not endear itself to human pride and folly.

¹ This first message was originally delivered at the IPC presbytery meeting in June 2013. As will be clear, I am indebted to Scott Oliphant's article '*Dripping like a leaky faucet*', which can be accessed at:

<http://www.reformation21.org/articles/dripping-like-a-leaky-faucet.php>



With respect to the second point, the Bible is not new; and certainly not sexy.

Along with these factors and partly because of them, there has been a steady erosion of confidence in the Bible as the authoritative word of God. There has been a sustained attack on the truth and trustworthiness of Scripture; and more recently, on the ability of words to convey concrete meaning about anything, including God.

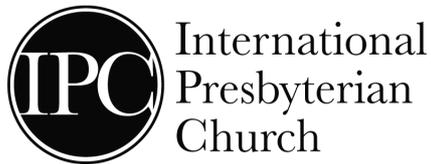
Even where Christians maintain a high view of the authority of Scripture (at least in theory), it is immediately qualified by our postmodern hermeneutics. People say, 'That's your interpretation; mine is different.' All interpretations are seen to be equally valid. And this view is pervasive, despite the fact the Bible itself rejects its legitimacy (see, for example, Mark 12:24–27 and 2 Peter 3:16).

In such a context, if people are still looking for a 'word from God', many have stopped believing it can be found in Scripture. So we place our trust in our experience of God rather than in God himself and his word.

Actually, there's nothing new in this. It was Scheleirmacher's conclusion 200 years ago. But the irony is that the so-called 'father of liberal theology' finds himself with some surprising bedfellows in his rejection of the sufficiency of Scripture. He is joined by Pentecostals and Charismatics, who are often strong on experience and weak on Scripture. And he is joined by Roman Catholics, whose Scripture is not sufficient unless mediated through the Magisterium and supplemented with tradition.

What then for those who hold to the reformed principle of *sola scriptura*? What for those who hold to the authority of Scripture *and* the sufficiency of Scripture? Does the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture rule out any other means of God revealing himself to people? Are Reformed Christians in danger of being anti-supernaturalistic, overly rationalistic and heavily reductionistic in our view of Scripture and the Christian faith? Are we limiting the sovereign freedom of God and restricting the work of the Holy Spirit?

First, though, a definition. The sufficiency of Scripture is the doctrine that: *Scripture contains everything we need to know from God, for our salvation, our faith and our life.* In the words of The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF):



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.²

However, we must be clear that when we talk about the sufficiency of Scripture, we are talking *about what God says* regarding our salvation, faith and life. We are *not* saying Scripture is all that is needed for salvation, faith and life. That's clearly not true, as the bible itself testifies — for example, we need the finished work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit to apply what Christ has accomplished. But note, I said 'as the bible itself testifies'. In other words, it is the Bible which alone tells us what we need to know about these things.

So the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture says, *positively*, that God has said all he needs to say; and, *negatively*, we don't need to know any more than the things God has chosen to make known to us.

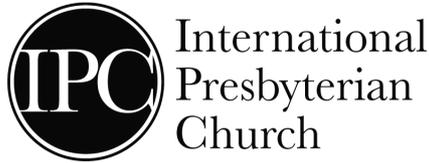
Incidentally, that has been true throughout the history of redemption. A verse John Calvin liked to quote is Deuteronomy 29:29: 'The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may follow all the words of this law.'

That has been true at each stage in the unfolding of God's progressive revelation. And it is true now that God has spoken (or revealed) his final word in the history of redemption. What is God's final word? Hebrews 1:1–3 tells us: 'In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son ... After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.'

God has spoken his fullest and final word to us in Jesus Christ. We are now in the last days, awaiting his return. God has nothing more to say, other than an outworking of what he has already said and done in Christ.

The hymn-writer puts it like this:

² WCF, 1.vi.



How firm a foundation,
ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith
in His excellent Word!
*What more can He say
than to you He hath said,*
You, who unto Jesus
for refuge have fled?³

The fullness and finality of God’s revelation is inseparable from the fullness and finality of God’s redemption.⁴ This is reflected in the fullness and finality of God’s written word, which is God’s sufficient testimony to his sufficient Son, the Word incarnate.

Therefore, Jim Philip, in his commentary on the WCF, says this: ‘**It cannot be** that new revelation can add anything to the gospel, and therefore all claims, either by sects or individuals, to have additional revelation must by definition be false.’⁵

Even in the early years of the church, we see the apostles insisting on the truth of Ephesians 2:20: that God’s household was ‘built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.’ The foundation for God’s household, the church, has already been laid; no other foundation is either necessary or valid; no additional foundation is either necessary or valid.

So, in the New Testament, we see how the apostles respond to claims of:

1. A different gospel: ‘But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: if anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God’s curse!’ (Gal. 1:8–9)

³ Attributed to various authors.

⁴ See Kevin DeYoung’s helpful article ‘The sufficiency of Christ and the sufficiency of Scripture’, which can be accessed at:
<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2013/10/29/the-sufficiency-of-christ-and-the-sufficiency-of-scripture/>

⁵ *The Westminster Confession of Faith: An Exposition*, Volume 1, page 26.

2. *Secret knowledge*: ‘We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person’ (1 John 2:3–4).

3. *Fresh revelation*: ‘Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us — whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter — asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way’ (2 Thess. 2:1–3)

In a helpful article, ‘Marc5Solas’ traces the history of contemporary claims to fresh revelation and states:

We see the common thread in all ‘direct revelation’ from God. At best, it leads to unorthodox theology... and at worst leads to outright rejection of Christ’s atoning work ... ‘New Revelation’ will always, always replace the gospel ... and it will replace it with faith in yourself; your ‘feelings’ and your works. If these revelations are truly ‘from God’ then they would, be definition, be on par with commands of Scripture. In other words, they would be law and to disobey them would be sin.⁶

That is why it is *these claims* to fresh revelation that are oppressive, *not* the word of God. As Dick Lucas has observed, if you are in a church meeting and someone says ‘The Lord said to me we should do this’, you might as well close your Bible and go home. For who can argue with the Lord?⁷

Let me finish by quoting the conclusion to the Marc5solas article:

God speaks to you. He speaks to you every time you open scripture and begin to read of the faith once and all delivered to the saints. Don’t be deceived by your subjective emotion. The heart is wicked above all things and certainly not the place to look for ‘nudges’. Open the word, the very ‘breath of God’.⁸

⁶ See the article at: <http://marc5solas.com/2013/05/31/does-god-get-it-wrong>.

⁷ A comment made at a conference where the author was present.

⁸ See: <http://marc5solas.com/2013/05/31/does-god-get-it-wrong>.