

The Sufficiency of Scripture and Contemporary Revelation¹

Part 2

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In this second talk, I want to continue our look at the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture and the claims of contemporary revelation. We often run into difficulties in this area, for various reasons:

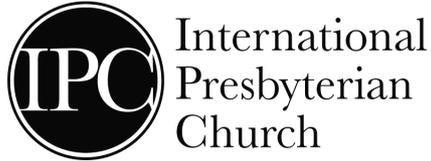
1. Christians disagree. That is, Christians, each of whom would claim to hold to the sufficiency of Scripture, disagree about the validity of ‘contemporary revelation’.
2. We often start examining the subject from the ‘Inside out’ rather than the ‘Outside in’. In other words, we let our subjective experience determine our view of the work of the Holy Spirit, rather than the word of God.²
3. The New Testament uses the word ‘revelation’ to mean both the once-for-all revelation of Jesus Christ and what theologians term ongoing illumination.³ So it is important to know what is meant when the word ‘revelation’ is being used. Sometimes Christians use the word ‘revelation’ to describe what is in reality a fresh illumination.⁴

¹ This is the second of two talks on this subject. The first was given at the IPC presbytery meeting held in June 2013, the second at the September 2013 meeting. Jeremiah 23:25–32 was read at the beginning of the talk.

² An observation made by Sinclair B Ferguson, speaking at the APC annual conference in Inverness, August 2013.

³ Ephesians 3:4–5; Ephesians 1:17. ‘Revelation is used by Paul to refer to both the giving of the truth and the illumination of its meaning. But these are clearly distinct phenomena. A categorical distinction exists between the lasting authority which attaches to apostolic revelation and the subjective ‘revelation’ or illumination which comes to all the people of God through the Spirit.’ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 230.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 232. Ferguson notes the danger of rejecting genuine illumination precisely because it is presented in terms of the formula of revelation.



Bearing in mind the danger of falling into the ‘Inside out’ trap (see ‘2’ above), here are three scenarios that illustrate the current relevance and importance of this doctrine.

Real-life scenarios:

1. Last week, I got an email from someone called Ed. I don’t know Ed, but Ed kindly sent me an email. In his email, Ed claimed that the Lord had asked him to send a letter to as many churches as possible. The attached letter was a lengthy stream of nonsense, involving politicians, conspiracy theories and the Antichrist. I don’t how the Lord asked Ed or how Ed knew it was the Lord. But the point is, Ed is claiming a personal instruction from God – to send his letter to as many churches as he can.

Because it’s nonsense, it is easy to dismiss this kind of ‘God-talk’ as a delusion and a deception. But here’s another scenario:

2. You go off to a Christian conference where there’s a mixture of good bible teaching, but also ‘charismatic’ elements, including prophecies and words of knowledge. These don’t contradict God’s word, but give some kind of additional message or insight from God about the present or future. Invariably, it’s a positive message.⁵ But the question is, does God really speak to his people in these ways today? Is there such a thing as contemporary, new revelation?

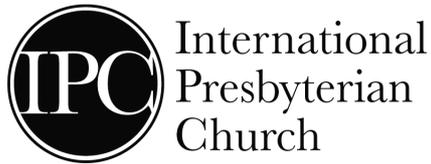
3. Some time ago, an Iranian Muslim told me he’d had a dream. He wanted me to tell him what it meant. We’d been meeting for a few weeks, studying the bible together. This was his dream: There was a narrow road ahead of him. But it was blocked with a big stone. There was a figure standing there, in white; my friend cannot see his face, but he says he knows it is Jesus. This person – Jesus – has got a hammer in his hand and is chipping away at the rock. *Please, Mr James, what does it mean?*

Let’s recap a little before we go any further. 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.*

That definition is taken from 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

⁵ Contemporary ‘prophecy’ and ‘visions’ are almost invariably positive. Contrast that with Daniel 8 and Acts 21:10–11.



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.⁶

But what about the ongoing work of Holy Spirit? Is he redundant? We'll see in a moment what the WCF says about the vital role of the Holy Spirit. But for now, note this: just as it is important that we do not divorce the written word from the Word made flesh, so it is important that we do not divorce the word of God from the Holy Spirit who breathed it out and co-authored it.⁷

Calvin writes about this in the *Institutes*, taking issue with the Libertines. He quotes Isaiah 59:21: 'As for me, this is my covenant with them,' says the LORD. 'My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants — from this time on and for ever,' says the LORD.

Calvin says, 'by a heinous sacrilege these rascals tear apart those things which the prophet joined together with an inviolable bond.' He also accuses the libertines of 'carelessly forsaking and bidding farewell to God's word' and seizing 'upon whatever they may have conceived while snoring!'⁸

But it is not just Isaiah who joins these things together with an inviolable bond. Here is Jesus in John 6:63: 'It is the Spirit who gives help; the flesh is of no help at all.' Later in John 16:13, Jesus says: 'But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.'

Is this truth an undiscovered country, yet to be revealed? No, this is a promise first and foremost to the apostles; it goes hand in hand with John 14:26: 'The Holy Spirit ... will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.' Why? So the apostles could commit the truth of Christ to the pages of the NT canon.

⁶ WCF, 1.vi.

⁷ 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21.

⁸ *Institutes*, I.x.1; I.x.3.



These promises are true for Christians today only in a secondary, derivative fashion. Yes, the Holy Spirit guides us into the truth, but it is the truth of God's word, the apostolic truth, the truth of Christ recorded for us in the NT under the Holy Spirit's influence. It is through his own word that the Holy Spirit teaches us all things and reminds us of everything God has said to us in Christ.

And so, Calvin writes: 'we ought zealously to apply ourselves both to read and to hearken to Scripture, if indeed we want to receive any gain and benefit from the Spirit of God'.⁹

That's striking:

1. The Puritan John Owen has said: 'Without the Holy Spirit we might as well burn our Bibles.'¹⁰
2. Calvin is saying: 'Without the Word of God we cannot gain any benefit from the Spirit of God.'

Calvin goes on to say, 'the Word is the instrument by which the Lord dispenses the illumination of his Spirit to believers'.¹¹

Calvin introduces a word which is significant for our understanding of the Holy Spirit's present ministry. This ministry is not one of new, contemporary revelation; but of *illumination*.

The WCF says this, following on from the section I quoted earlier:

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word.¹²

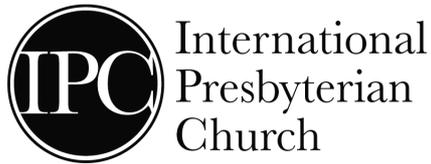
Jim Philip makes this comment:

⁹ Ibid., I.ix.2.

¹⁰ *The Works of John Owen*, 3:192.

¹¹ *Institutes* I.ix.3.

¹² WCF, 1.vi.



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. Having said this, however, we must go on to say that there is such a thing as fresh illumination. It is always possible for the Holy Spirit to lead men more and more into the truth ... but the fresh truth will always be in accordance with Scripture, never something that is beyond it, or contrary to it. The distinction between revelation and inspiration (which are once-for-all) and illumination must be maintained.¹³

It is this distinction which is in danger of being forgotten, ignored or blurred in many of our contemporary discussions about these matters.

At the 2010 EMA, Ian Hamilton debated with Wayne Grudem on ‘The Continuation of Prophecy’, which has a direct bearing on the subject we’re considering here.¹⁴ Grudem tries to draw a distinction between contemporary prophecy and biblical prophecy, a distinction which is not found in Scripture itself.

In a similar vein, Grudem has written: ‘No modern revelations from God are to be placed on a level equal to Scripture in authority.’¹⁵ The problem is, functionally, people do. And who can blame them? If someone is convinced the Lord has spoken to them (see scenario 1, above), then that ‘voice’ or message has to be authoritative.

Grudem also says: ‘We must insist that God does not require us to believe anything about himself or his work in the world that is contained in these revelations but not in Scripture.’¹⁶ One response to that would be: what’s the point of them, then?

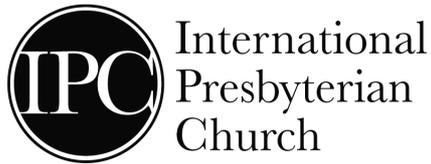
In practice, claims by Christians to a fresh revelation from the Lord are at best either redundant and unnecessary; or at worst dangerous and lead us away from the Gospel and the truth of Scripture.

¹³ *The Westminster Confession of Faith: An Exposition*, Volume 1, p. 26.

¹⁴ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2012/02/23/a-debate-on-the-continuation-of-prophecy/>.

¹⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, p. 60.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.



But what about my Muslim friend (scenario 3)? Can we call his dream a work of illumination?¹⁷ Does the Holy Spirit work in different ways when there is no word of God? Even if that is so, it seems people like my friend are always brought, eventually, to the Christ of the Scriptures, otherwise we would never hear their stories. Often, they only recognise the figure in their dream as representing ‘Jesus’ *after* they are introduced to the Jesus of the Scriptures. This is not so much contemporary revelation as the Spirit drawing them to the place (or person) of pre-existing special revelation – and illuminating it (him).

John Owen, the Puritan theologian, has said this:

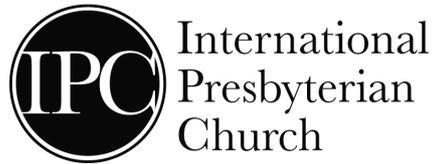
Since the finishing of the canon of the Scripture, the church is not under that conduct as to stand in need of such new extraordinary revelations. It doth, indeed, live upon the internal gracious operations of the Spirit, enabling us to understand, believe, and obey the perfect, complete revelation of the will of God already made; but new revelations it hath neither need nor use of; — and to suppose them, or a necessity of them, not only overthrows the perfection of the Scripture, but also leaveth us uncertain whether we know all that is to be believed in order unto salvation, or our whole duty, or when we may do so; for it would be our duty to live all our days in expectation of new revelations, wherewith neither peace, assurance, nor consolation is consistent.¹⁸

Owen is right to focus on the pastoral implications of having unrealistic and unfounded expectations of ongoing revelations from God. A few weeks ago, I heard of a Christian who had been brought up in the Pentecostal tradition, being moved to tears as she sat under the ministry of the word in a reformed church. Why? Because in her former experience she could not be sure of God’s love for her unless and until she received some kind of special, direct ‘word from the Lord’. But when she started to hear the true ‘word from the Lord’, the word of God proclaimed in the

¹⁷ As argued by Scott Oliphint in his article ‘Dripping like a leaky faucet’, which can be accessed at:

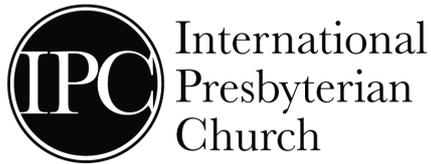
<http://www.reformation21.org/articles/dripping-like-a-leaky-faucet.php>.

¹⁸ Ibid. Quoted by Scott Oliphint: John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Gould, Ages Digital Library CD ed., 16 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 4.80–81.



power of the Spirit, she was overwhelmed with what she had not previously grasped or experienced: an assurance of God's love for her in Christ.

The irony is that the 'word' she was looking for was there all the time. The good news is that, under the Spirit's illuminating light, she discovered that this word was also — and is also — sufficient for all time.



Appendix

At the presbytery meeting, I was asked what I said to my Muslim friend who had the dream. My response to him went something like this:

I'm not a Joseph or a Daniel. But the Bible does talk about the Christian way being a narrow way. Perhaps some of the difficulties and objections you have to the Christian faith are a bit like the stone blocking the road. Over these past weeks, we have looked at what the bible says to try and answer your objections. The Bible is the word of God. And in Jeremiah it is described as a hammer which breaks a rock into pieces.

At this point, I could not remember the precise reference in Jeremiah, but flipped the pages of my unmarked Bible over to the prophet's book — whereupon my eye immediately fell upon Jeremiah 23:29: 'Is not my word like fire', declares the LORD, 'and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?'

Two things to note:

1. Reformed Christians who hold to the sufficiency of Scripture are not anti-supernatural! God clearly answered my arrow-prayer for help and providentially ordered the opening of the bible at the right page and directed my eye to light upon the correct verse.
2. The context in Jeremiah 23 is striking. The Lord is condemning prophets who prophesy 'the delusions of their own minds' (v. 26). He then says: 'Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?' In a situation where it might have been easy to get carried away with the dream, it was a clear warning and reminder of what is valuable (the grain of the Lord's word); and of what the Lord values (the one who speaks his revealed word faithfully.)