

## *Christian Freedom Bounded by Law*

In the previous article in this series, [we](#) asserted that the underlying principle of true Christianity is the full sufficiency of Scripture for all life and godliness. All other true principles and practices flow from this “first principle,” or axiom, of Protestant Christianity. This primary principle of “sola Scriptura” is especially important in three areas of church life: doctrine, worship, and polity. [We](#) propose to discuss one of the “legs” in this series of articles. However, from the beginning we should realize that we are simply saying the *same things* about church polity that Protestants have always said about doctrine and that reformed Presbyterians have always said about worship: we must limit ourselves to “thus saith the Lord” in such things.

Also in the last article, [we](#) made reference to 2 Timothy 3:16-17. In that passage, Paul told his protégé, Timothy, that Scripture is not only inspired, but also that it is sufficient to every good work. If Scripture is sufficient for every good work, then surely it contains sufficient information to know how God wants the church to be structured upon earth. Some might argue at this point that the Scripture contains very little information on how the church should be structured and they would then claim that the paucity of information indicates that we must invent our rules to “fill in the gaps.” It is the historic position of Presbyterians, however, that where there are “gaps,” the church should not be legislating or operating at all.

Sadly, we live in a day in which Protestants, rather than having their consciences bound to the Word of God, would bind the Word of God by their consciences. That is to say, men wish to exert a liberty that God has never given in his Word – a liberty to do as they please in matters of worship and polity. “Scripture is sufficient for our doctrine,” they say, “but the silence of Scripture has left us free to develop church government following only broad principles.” But that denies that there is such a doctrine as ecclesiology and at the same time places church government outside the realm of “life and godliness.” We maintain that there is a principle by which we can claim that our church authority is a real extension of biblical authority – and the principle is that the government of the church may do only those things which Scripture commands it to do.

Some might still object, “Oh, but the church has a greater measure of the Holy Spirit today than it did under the Old Testament. Surely we must understand that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. If we limited the church’s authority to the ‘letter of Scripture,’ we would be leaving no room for the Holy Spirit.”

We maintain, however, that the Holy Spirit guides the church *by* the Scriptures He inspired. In fact, we maintain along with the *Westminster Confession*, that all controversies of religion are to be settled by the Holy Spirit *speaking in the Scriptures*. We do not separate the Spirit from the Word He inspired. We do not settle controversies by appeal to the Word apart from the Spirit; nor by appeal to the Spirit apart from the Word. Instead, we settle all controversies of religion by appeal to the Spirit *speaking in the Word* (*Westminster Confession* I.10). Paul, in his dispute with the Jews at Rome, claimed as much: “Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers” (Acts 28:25). It was not simply Isaiah who spoke, but the Holy Ghost who spoke *through* Isaiah. It is not right to appeal to the Holy Spirit apart from Scriptures, for we say in this instance, “what God has joined together, let not man put asunder.” The divorce of Word and Spirit is as sure to end in tragedy as is the divorce of a married couple.

The Holy Ghost, speaking through the same prophet Isaiah said, “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isaiah 8:20). Not only in worship (Deuteronomy 12:32), but respecting all God’s commandments (Deuteronomy 4:2), God forbids his people to leave undone that which he has commanded and to add anything of their own devising to the Lord’s commandments. Thus generations later, when the Pharisees had added many of their own commandments to those of the Lord’s as a sort of “fence around the law,” Jesus condemned the practice. He stated, “this people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:8-9).

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