

Simplicity, Scripture, And A Three-Legged Stool

What is the most foundational principle of Christianity? When **we** ask that question, it is important for me to state that **we are** not asking if there is a principle upon which all who call themselves Christians would agree. Instead, **we are** asking what basic principle must we have in order to understand Christianity in such a way that it defines all *genuine* Christians by implication. There was a time when true Protestants, at least, could have answered the question with minimal hesitation.

The Protestant Reformation was based upon the five “solas.” *Soli Deo Gloria* meant that the chief end or purpose of man is to be found in the glory of God. His glory is the greatest good and the ultimate purpose for which we do all things. *Sola Fide* meant that justification of the sinner is through faith alone, without any admixture of personal works. *Solus Christus* meant that Jesus Christ is the only procurer of our reconciliation with God and is the sufficient object of faith for our justification. *Sola Gratia* meant that salvation is by grace apart from any deserving or foreseen good on the part of the sinner.

But foundational to all these other “solas,” was the axiomatic principle of *sola Scriptura*. That principle states that the teaching of Scripture is sufficient for all of life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). How do we know that salvation is by grace alone? How do we learn that the work of Christ alone is sufficient for our justification? How is it that we can be sure that faith is the only necessary instrument by which we receive Christ? How can we be certain that that the glory of God is the single chief purpose – the *summum bonum* – of mankind? We can know these things because Scripture teaches them – and we need no other testimony for it to be true. The Scriptures are “self-authenticating” in this respect – their authority is directly from God and not dependent upon any other authority on earth.

If the Scriptures are, indeed, sufficient for life and godliness, then we must assert with confidence that they are sufficient for telling us how Christ has structured his church. We do not believe that Christ has told us to “observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19), but has left us with little or no idea what those commands might be. In order to have any degree of stability, a stool must have three legs. So, too, the Christian church has three legs upon which it stands: that of doctrine, that of worship, and that of discipline or polity. If we attempt to replace any one of those legs with our own man-made rules, then to that extent we deny Christ his rightful place as “the only lawgiver in the church” (cf. James 4:12).

Scripture claims for itself, not only that it is inspired, but also that it is sufficient. Thus Paul told Timothy, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16). In the following verse, however, Paul also maintained that the inspired Scriptures are able by doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction to make the man of God “perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” Significantly, if the Scripture furnishes the man of God and makes him able to do every good work, then nothing else but Scripture is necessary for doing all good works.

If a congregation or denomination does not accept either the full plenary inspiration or the full sufficiency of Scripture, this will have a profoundly devastating effect on how it orders its affairs. Many conservatives today maintain that it is largely a matter of indifference as to how the church orders itself. They maintain that the church is to be left to itself to decide *for itself* how it practices its church government. Some even point to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1:6, and read “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.”

From this statement, they proceed to make everything they want to do without Scripture warrant a so-called “circumstance” and place such things under the rubric of 1 Corinthians 14:40. However, it is only activities that are common to human actions and societies that can come under such a heading. The form of church government is not common to human society, but is specific to the church itself.

In the next article in this series, it will be **our** purpose to demonstrate that such a “regulative principle” of church government exists and that it is taught in Scripture.

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