

## **2 Thessalonians (8): Thanksgiving to God for our Salvation (part 2)**

The Apostle Paul had instructed this church about the coming apostasy and the rise of the man of sin within Christendom. Only after these two events had occurred would the Lord Jesus return at His second coming, at which time He will gather together to Himself all Christians and He will bring judgment upon the world (Cf. 2 Thess. 2:1-4). But the ones who refused to believe the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ will rather choose to believe the lie of the man of lawlessness. And in God's judgment upon the wicked, God Himself "will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2:11f).

But in contrast to those whom God will damn on that Day, His people will receive their promised salvation. Their blessing will not be earned by them or received due to anything meritorious about them; rather, they will be saved due to the purpose of God from eternity to save them, which was solely due to the grace of God He lavishes upon them. Because of this truth of God's sovereign grace, we read in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 that Paul was compelled to thank God for these Christians, for it was due to God's grace alone that He had granted them salvation. Let us again read Paul's words in **2 Thessalonians 2:13-17**:

<sup>13</sup>But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits<sup>1</sup> to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. <sup>14</sup>To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>15</sup>So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

<sup>16</sup>Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, <sup>17</sup>comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

On the last occasion that we were considering this passage, we began to work through these verses using the following outline:

- 1. Giving thanks to God for our salvation (vs. 13, 14)**
- 2. Rendering faithful obedience to God's Word in response to our salvation by His grace (v. 15)**
- 3. Praying to God that He would comfort and establish our hearts (vs. 16, 17)**

We addressed the first of these three matters last time--

### **I. Giving thanks to God for our salvation (vs. 13, 14)**

We addressed first the main statement, "***But we ought always to give thanks to God for you...***" We then considered the special love that God had for His people, even from eternity. Paul called these Christians, "***brothers beloved by the Lord***" (v. 13). God calls His elect His "beloved", and no others, although He is loving in His actions unto all, because "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). I recall years ago someone once asking in a Bible study what precisely does it mean when God calls us His "beloved." There was a pause, then my old friend from Arkansas, Doug, spoke up: "It means they be-loved of God." Doug

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<sup>1</sup> As we considered last Lord's Day, rather than the ESV translation, "as the firstfruits", the preferred reading should be "from the beginning" as in the NKJV.

was right. God loves His people with an everlasting love, which is a unique love that He has for His people alone, whom He regards to be in union with His Beloved Son.

We next examined the matter of God's election of His beloved ones from eternity, for God had chosen them "***from the beginning to be saved.***" Paul then described the manner in which God had called them unto salvation; God had chosen them to be saved "***through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.***" God sets apart His chosen ones from the fallen world, calling them effectually by His Holy Spirit, whereby they believe the truth of the gospel and are thereby saved. Verse 14 speaks of this effectual calling. Paul wrote, "***To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.***"

God extends this effectual call of the gospel to specific individuals, even to each one of His elect. This is the call of God that is heard by them "who have ears to hear." The Holy Spirit issues this effectual call to the elect through the general call of the gospel. When the gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit makes it understandable and attractive to the one He is calling to salvation. God makes that sinner willing in the day of His power (Cf. Psa. 110:3). The sinner responds to the gospel, repents of his sin, and believes on Jesus Christ as His Lord and Savior. This call of God is effectual in that it always accomplishes the purpose for which God had issued it--the salvation of God's chosen ones. Paul described his own experience of this effectual call of God:

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and ***called me by His grace***, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood. (Gal. 1:15)

Before we ever called on God to save us, He called on us to save us. This effectual call is ***the inward call of the Holy Spirit*** whereby He enables us to hear, understand, and respond to the gospel. It is frequently referred to as an ***effectual calling*** because it ***always*** results in bringing the one called to faith in Jesus Christ. Here is a definition:

***Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, He does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered us in the gospel.***

God saves His people through His gospel, the good news of salvation from sin through the Lord Jesus Christ. This gospel is contained and explained the God's Word, the Holy Bible. The Word of God, therefore, is the means by which God saves His people. This is why the Holy Bible is central and absolutely essential to us.

The writers of the New Testament stated that it was through the proclamation of the Word of God that God saved His people. James wrote: "Of His own will He brought us forth ***by the word of truth***, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (Jam 1:18). And Paul wrote in Ephesians, "In Him you also trusted, ***after you heard the word of truth***, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13). And Peter wrote of coming to salvation in terms of being born again. He wrote, "

<sup>22</sup>Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, <sup>23</sup>***having been born again***, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, ***through the word of God*** which lives and abides forever, <sup>24</sup>because "All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, <sup>25</sup>but ***the word of the LORD*** endures forever." Now ***this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.*** (1 Pet. 1:22-25)

Returning to our text, we next read that we are to be...

## **II. Rendering faithful obedience to God's Word in response to our salvation by His grace (v. 15)**

The same Word of God that converted us is to govern us as we live before Him. We read in **verse 15**, “*So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.*”

The response that we Christians should have to the grace of God that has brought us salvation is to order our lives according to the Christian faith that has been delivered unto us. By “traditions taught by us”, Paul was referring to the apostolic doctrines that had been circulated among the Lord’s churches. At the time that Paul wrote this letter, the New Testament canon of Scripture was not complete. Moreover 1 and 2 Thessalonians were of the earliest of Paul’s inspired epistles. Perhaps the Gospel of Mark had already been written, but the other three Gospels did not yet exist and most of Paul’s epistles had not been written. But there was much oral tradition of the apostles’ witness and words regarding the ministry of Jesus Christ. There were perhaps available one or two epistles that the apostle Paul and others had already penned. Paul was urging these Christians to acknowledge and submit to the apostolic witness in whatever form they had available to them. By way of extension and application, we are to order our lives according to the Holy Scriptures that Our God has delivered unto us. Our New Testament contains the witness of the apostles recorded and passed on to the churches. The New Testament contains what Paul described here as “*the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.*”

Here is a confirming word regarding this matter:

Linked with this is the injunction to “hold the traditions.” The verb (“hold”) is used by Paul elsewhere only in Colossians 2:19 (of holding fast to Christ the “Head”). It is often used in the literal sense as of holding with the hand. It denotes a firm grip. It is used of holding the traditions of the elders in Mark 7:3, 8. “Traditions” is a word that points us to the fact that the Christian message is essentially derivative. It does not originate in man’s fertile imaginations. It rests on the facts of the life, death, and resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Paul disclaims originating these things, and expressly says that the things he passed on he had himself first received (1 Cor. 15:3). For us these traditions are embodied in the documents of the New Testament. But for Paul’s readers there was no such volume. For them the Christian traditions were principally those that they had received by word of mouth. Paul also associates “epistle of ours” with the spoken word. By this he probably means 1 Thessalonians. He puts no difference between the authority of the written word and the spoken word. Both alike were in very deed the word of God, as we see from 1 Thessalonians 2:13 and 1 Corinthians 14:37.<sup>2</sup>

Now Paul used the Greek word, τὰς παραδόσεις (*tas paradoseis*), which is a plural noun that is translated “the traditions” in verse 15.<sup>3</sup> Paul would use this word in one other place, 1 Corinthians 11:2, which he had not yet written when he wrote this epistle. That text reads, “Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep *the traditions* just as I delivered them to you.” The context of both of these verses indicates that what Paul meant by the word was official, authoritative teaching, which later came to be recognized as authoritative Holy Scripture. He was not speaking of “the traditions” that were apart from the Holy Scriptures. He was speaking of the traditions that would before long become acknowledged as the Holy Scriptures.

Now, a foundation of our Protestant understanding of divine truth is that *the Bible and the Bible alone is the sole source of information regarding what we are to believe and how we are to live*. Our confession reads,

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (William. B. Eerdmans, 1959), p. 240.

<sup>3</sup> The three letter Greek word, *tas*, is the definite article (“the”).

<sup>4</sup> *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, Art. 1.

We employ the Scriptures in our understanding of truth and our assessment of truth claims. Again, our confession states:

The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered, our faith is finally resolved.<sup>5</sup>

Our Protestant conviction was formed and established in its conflict with Roman Catholicism of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Roman Catholicism has a different understanding of authority. Rome affirms along with us that the *Bible*, the *Holy Scripture*, is the Word of God, but it believes that there is a second, equally authoritative source of divine instruction. Rome claims that God's revelation of truth continues through the *Tradition* of the church. Roman Catholic Church Tradition is taught to be as authoritative as Scripture. Now some may look at Paul's use of the expression in verse 15, which reads, "*stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us*", and mistakenly conclude this commends as authoritative the official *Tradition* of the Roman Catholic Church. But this would be a great mistake.

What does the Roman Catholic Church claim regarding its Tradition? Here is the official statement of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* regarding "Tradition":

77 "In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church the apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them 'their own position of teaching authority.'"<sup>35</sup> Indeed, "the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time."<sup>36</sup>

78 This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called *Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture*, though closely connected to it. Through Tradition, "the Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes."<sup>6</sup>

Here is Rome's official stated relationship between Scripture and Tradition:

80 "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal."<sup>40</sup> Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own "always, to the close of the age."<sup>41</sup> . . . two distinct modes of transmission

81 "Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit."<sup>42</sup> "And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound, and spread it abroad by their preaching."<sup>43</sup>

82 As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, "does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), par. 77 and 78.

Rome reasons in this way: First, “The apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them their own position of teaching authority.”<sup>7</sup> Second, “This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely related to it.”<sup>8</sup> And third, “Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored *with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.*”<sup>9</sup>

I witnessed first-hand how this view of authority influences the way one understands truth. Years ago while working through my PhD program, I was required to take two classes at an institution of similar rated education credentials. One of the classes I enrolled in was in Berkley California at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU). It was a class on the Apostolic Fathers that was taught by a Roman Catholic Dominican Priest. The Apostolic Fathers are ten letters or “books” that were written by men who were thought to be the disciples of the apostles.<sup>10</sup> The books were written in Greek as were the New Testament books. The professor began the class by teaching through the New Testament books of 2 Peter and Jude, because scholarly opinion, so-called, has those books written not by Peter and Jude, but by the spiritual descendants of the Apostles in the post apostolic era. This professor taught 1 Peter and Jude as the authoritative Word of God; I appreciated that of him. But then he began to teach through the Apostolic Fathers. I took note that he regarded and presented each of the books of the Apostolic Fathers with the same respect and regard for accuracy and authoritative instruction that he had of 2 Peter and Jude. He viewed all of those books with equal authority in their teaching, but also presented the truth as evolving and developing from the New Testament epistles into the Apostolic Fathers. He viewed Scripture and Tradition both as God’s infallible revelation.

The problem with this position is that through the years the Tradition adds information to what the Scriptures teach. New teachings are embraced that increasingly conflict with God’s written Word. This

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<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), par. 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 78.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 82.

<sup>10</sup> List of the Apostolic Fathers:

-- **Epistle to Diognetus**—The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus is traditionally the earliest example of Christian apologetics, specifically defending Christianity from its accusers. Language and other textual evidence date the work to the late second century and have caused it to be dropped in some collections as not truly “apostolic.”

-- **First Epistle of Clement**—One of the earliest Christian documents outside the New Testament, this letter is addressed from an unnamed person representing the church at Rome to the church at Corinth. It objects to the deposition of certain presbyters (elders) by the Corinthian church and is important as an early assertion of Roman primacy.

-- **Second Epistle of Clement**—Not from the same writer as 1 Clement, this work is actually a sermon, delivered to a Gentile Christian audience primarily of former pagans. It is one of the first documents which treats the words of Jesus as “scripture,” yet it also apparently quotes from the heretical Gospel of Thomas, or from that gospel’s sayings source, in which Jesus affirms that the Kingdom of God will come: “When the two shall be one, and the outside as the inside, and the male with the female, neither male or female.” (2 Clem 12:2)

-- **Didache**—Not rediscovered until the nineteenth century, this handbook of moral instruction and liturgical practice is also known as the “Teaching of the Twelve” (Apostles). More in the Jewish-Christian tradition than the other works in the collection, it emphasizes ethical behavior, proper worship and ceremonial practices, and also gives instructions about discerning false prophets, hoping that itinerant true prophets will settle in local churches perhaps to serve as bishops.

-- **Epistle of Barnabas**—Also called Pseudo-Barnabas, this is an anonymous treatise or sermon attributed to Paul’s companion Barnabas, somewhat in the tradition of the Epistle to the Hebrews. It warns Christians to avoid Judaistic attitudes, but goes further than *Hebrews* by affirming that God’s covenant belongs to Christians alone, and was never in fact received by the Jews.

-- **Epistles of Ignatius**—Seven short letters of the future martyr, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, to various other churches, particularly important in understanding the emerging of the “monarchical episcopacy,” the institution of a single bishop as the central authority in each city’s church, a principle which Ignatius strongly endorses.

-- **Epistle of Polycarp**—A letter from Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna and future martyr, to the Philippian church, which many scholars believe to be a cover-letter sent with Polycarp’s collection of the letters of Ignatius, although it deals primarily with other subjects, such as praise for the Apostle Paul and an exhortation against heresy.

-- **Martyrdom of Polycarp**—An account of Polycarp’s glorious martyrdom at the age of 86, this work is the first known description of martyrdom outside of the New Testament.

-- **Shepherd of Hermas**—A work of apocalyptic literature and prophecy by Hermas of Rome, widely read publicly in the early churches, predicting the imminent return of Christ and offering one last chance for Christians to repent of post-baptismal sins.

-- **Papias**—The fragments from the writings of Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis (modern Pamukkale, Turkey), which have survived as quotations by later writers.

was one of the points of contention that our Lord had with the Pharisees. They had an identical conception of God's authority to that we just described. They believed in the authority of the written Scriptures. But they also believed in the authority of the Oral Tradition, the opinions of the rabbis that had long before been codified, written down, and passed on to them. We read of this in **Mark 7:5-13**:

<sup>5</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" <sup>6</sup>And He said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; <sup>7</sup>*in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*' <sup>8</sup>*You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.*" <sup>9</sup>And He said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! <sup>10</sup>For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' <sup>11</sup>But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)-- <sup>12</sup>then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, <sup>13</sup>thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. *And many such things you do.*"

When both God's Word and fallen man's tradition are held in equal esteem, fallen man's tradition will lead to defection and departure from the Word of God. God has given us the Holy Scriptures alone are to govern our faith and life before Him.

The authority of Holy Scripture alone came to be recognized as *the formal principle* of the Reformation. This is what ultimately led to and resulted in the Protestant Reformation—the belief in *Sola Scriptura -- Scripture alone*. When we say that we hold to *sola scriptura*, we are asserting that *the Bible is the only inspired and authoritative Word of God* and as such, it is the only source for Christian doctrine. We also assert by the expression, *sola scriptura*, that *the Bible is understandable and self-interpreting*. We believe in the perspicuity of the Scriptures, that anyone can understand the Scriptures, if they read them prayerfully, carefully, and the Holy Spirit blesses their effort. Our statement of faith asserts this truth in this way:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them. (*The Baptist Confession of 1689*, Art. 1, par. 7).

The Bible is its own interpreter. In other words, any one verse or passage of Scripture is best understood by other verses or passages of Scripture that speak to the same subject. The Bible does not need an interpreter outside of itself to make it known to its readers. This doctrine, *sola scriptura*, is a principle that directly opposes those denominations that claim someone outside and other than the Bible must interpret the Bible before common people may receive its truth. This doctrine, therefore, is directly opposed to the teaching of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and Anglo-Catholic traditions, which teach that the Bible can be interpreted rightly only by Apostolic Tradition.<sup>11</sup>

*Sola scriptura* is what first set the Protestant reformers against Rome. The Roman Catholic position is that the church (i.e. Rome) is the custodian of God's revelation. The church alone, in other words the leaders of the church alone, have the authority to interpret the Bible for the people.

Rome has always criticized Protestants by saying that this belief in *sola scriptura* is a dangerous invitation to individualism. It is as though Protestants were saying, "Reject the authority of the church. Away with its creeds. It's just me and my Bible." But this is not what the Reformers believed or taught.

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<sup>11</sup> In the case of Roman Catholicism, *sola scriptura* refutes the belief that the Roman Catholic Magisterium (the teaching authority embodied in Bishops in union with the Pope) has the only ability and authority to interpret Scripture rightly.

They balanced themselves between Rome, which claimed to have the exclusive authority to interpret Scripture rightly, and some of the Anabaptist radicals, who did not think they needed the Bible at all, because the Holy Spirit communicated directly to them, or so they thought. The Reformers insisted that the Bible was the source and final authority in determining information about God, how we might know Him, and how He would have us live. The Reformers believed in the need for teachers in the church to help give understanding of the Word of God. But they asserted that the whole church, including the laity, had the responsibility and the ability to read and interpret the Bible. The Reformers soon developed confessions of faith that the churches received and endorsed as their official statements of what they believed the Bible taught.

Now, just as Rome, the Eastern Orthodox, as well as certain radicals rejected the principle of *sola scriptura*, we have similar problems today in evangelicalism. There are some who simply go to church and listen and accept what the preacher says, regardless of whether or not it is truly biblical. Their biblical knowledge is appalling. In effect they have made their pastors little popes, or “magesteriums,” accepting their word as authoritative rather than the Scriptures alone. One described it in this way:

Today, this same process of “dumbing down” has meant that we are, in George Gallup's words, “a nation of biblical illiterates.” Perhaps we have a high view of the Bible's inspiration: 80% of adult Americans believe that the Bible is the literal or inspired Word of God. But 30% of the teenagers who attend church regularly do not even know why Easter is celebrated. “The decline in Bible reading,” says Gallup, “is due in part to the widely held conviction that the Bible is inaccessible, and to less emphasis on religious training in the churches.” Just as Rome's infallibility rested on the belief that the Bible itself was difficult, obscure, and confusing, so today people want the “net breakdown” from the professionals: what does it mean for me and how will it help me and make me happy? But those who read the Bible for more than devotional meditations know how clear it is--at least on the main points it addresses--and how it ends up making religion less confusing and obscure. Again today, the Bible--especially in mainline Protestant churches--is a mysterious book that can only be understood by a small cadre of biblical scholars who are “in the know.” (Michael Horton)

But then there are those churches, and there are many of them, that believe and emphasize direct revelation of God through the Holy Spirit apart from the Bible. They also deny the principle of *sola scriptura*. Of those who were like them in the early days of the Reformation, **John Calvin** said of them, “When the fanatics boast extravagantly of the Spirit, the tendency is always to bury the Word of God so they may make room for their own falsehoods.” The authority and the sufficiency of the Word of God suffers when self-proclaimed prophets stand forward and claim to speak to us directly from God.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century pastor and theologian **Jonathan Edwards** wrote about these matters. There were things like this going on in his day. He wrote this:

I would therefore entreat the people of God to be very cautious how they give heed to such things. I have seen them fail in very many instances, and know by experience that impressions being made with great power, and upon the minds of true, yea eminent, saints... are no sure signs of their being revelations from heaven. I have known such impressions fail, in some instances, attended with all these circumstances."<sup>12</sup>

This is good advice to follow. The Bible alone is a revelation of the very words of God. God speaks to His people today through His written word that was recorded long ago.

The bottom line is that the Reformers believed, and we believe with them, that the Word of God is sufficient. It is sufficient to teach us everything we need to know and should know about God, ourselves, and how we are live before Him and with one another. The Holy Scriptures are authoritative. They

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

command us as the Word of God. The Bible is God's Word given to us, telling us what we are to believe, how we are to think, and how we are to live as His people. But again, there are threats to the sufficiency and authority of the Holy Scriptures in today's evangelical churches. Again, **Michael Horton** expressed it well,

Similarly today, psychology threatens to reshape the understanding of the self, as even in the evangelical pulpit sin becomes "addiction"; the Fall as an event is replaced with one's "victim" status; salvation is increasingly communicated as mental health, peace of mind, and self-esteem, and my personal happiness and self-fulfilment are center-stage rather than God's holiness and mercy, justice and love, glory and compassion. Does the Bible define the human problem and its solution? Or when we really want facts, do we turn somewhere else, to a modern secular authority who will really carry weight in my sermon? Of course, the Bible will be cited to bolster the argument. Political ideology, sociology, marketing, and other secular "authorities" must never be allowed priority in answering questions the Bible addresses. That is, in part, what this affirmation (*sola scriptura*) means, and evangelicals today seem as confused on this point as was the medieval church.

But we would say that we are not confused about this matter. We are a Reformed Baptist church. And as such, we affirm *sola scriptura*. With regard to the faith and practice of Christianity, if it is not in the Bible, then it is not to be believed or practiced. We seek and purpose to be governed by the Word of God alone.

Perhaps the importance and relevance of the principle of *sola scriptura* for Protestantism can best be illustrated by the words and actions of **Martin Luther**, the first and leading Reformer in Europe. Raised a catholic, and trained as an Augustinian monk, Luther came to embrace the teachings of the Bible alone in matters of faith and practice. It brought him into intense and direct conflict with the pope. He was tried and excommunicated for his views. But first, the pope had issued a ban against him. He had hoped that the German people would follow the edict of the ban and reject Luther and his teachings. Listen to the essence of the ban, particularly how it rejects Luther's view of *sola scriptura*.

Arise, O Lord, and judge thy cause. A wild boar has invaded thy vineyard. Arise, O Peter, and consider the case of the Holy Roman Church, the mother of all churches, consecrated by thy blood. Arise O Paul, who by thy teaching and death hast and dost illumine the Church. Arise, all ye saints, and the whole universal Church, whose interpretation of Scripture has been assailed. We can scarcely express our grief over the ancient heresies which have been revived in Germany. We are the more downcast because she was always in the forefront of the war on heresy. Our pastoral office can no longer tolerate the pestiferous virus of the following forty-one errors. [Here they are stated.] We can no longer suffer the serpent to creep through the field of the Lord. The books of Martin Luther which contain these errors are to be examined and burned. As for Martin himself, good God, what office of paternal love have we omitted in order to recall him from his errors? Have we not offered him a safe conduct and money for the journey? And he has had the temerity to appeal to a future council although our predecessors, Pius II and Julius II, subjected such appeals to the penalties of heresy. Now therefore we give Martin sixty days in which to submit, dating from the time of the publication of this bull in his district. Anyone who presumes to infringe our excommunication and anathema will stand under the wrath of Almighty God and of the apostles Peter and Paul. (June 15, 1520)

Upon receiving this ban, Luther responded in a letter to a friend. Here are some of his words in which he addressed several items in the pope's list of forty-one "errors":

I was wrong, I admit it, when I said that indulgences were "the pious defrauding of the faithful." I recant and I say, "Indulgences are the most impious frauds and imposters of the most rascally pontiffs, by which they deceive the souls and destroy the goods of the faithful."

I was wrong. I retract the statement that certain articles of John Hus are evangelical. I say now. "Not some but all the articles of John Hus were condemned by Antichrist and his apostles in the

synagogue of Satan.” And to your face, most holy Vicar of God, I say freely that all the condemned articles of John Hus are evangelical and Christian, and yours are downright impious and diabolical.

Luther publicly burned the ban that the pope had issued to him along with various books common to priests which defined church policy, church law, and church doctrines. He explained his action saying,

“Since they have burned my books, I burn theirs. The canon law was included because it makes the pope a god on earth. So far I have merely fooled with this business of the pope. All my articles condemned by Antichrist are Christian. Seldom has the pope overcome anyone with Scripture and with reason.”

Here he was affirming the principle, *sola scriptura*.

Luther was given sixty days to repent. The ban had directed Luther to appear before an official governmental assembly, called a diet, in the city of Worms. He appeared there on **April 17, 1521**. This was not merely an ecclesiastical court of the Roman Catholic Church, but present was the Roman Catholic emperor Charles of the Holy Roman Empire along with many high officials. John Eck, a representative of the archbishop of Trier, publicly examined Luther. Eck confronted Luther with a pile of books and asked whether they were his. He answered: “The books are all mine, and I have written more.” Eck asked, “Do you defend them all, or do you care to reject a part?” Luther considered the matter and then said,

This touches God and his word. This affects the salvation of souls. Of this Christ said, ‘He who denies Me before men, him will I deny before My father.’ To say too little or too much would be dangerous. I beg you, give me time to think it over.

He was given until the next day to consider his answer. When he appeared he said boldly that he would not retract anything he had written. He stated that if he were to be shown error from the Scriptures, he would be the first to throw his books into the fire. To this Eck responded:

Your plea to be heard from Scripture is the one always made by heretics. You do nothing but renew the errors of Wycliffe and Hus.

Luther answered with this most famous response:

Since then Your majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.

During the next five days, private conferences were held to determine Luther’s fate. The Emperor presented the final draft of the Edict of Worms on May 25, 1521, declaring Luther an outlaw, banning his literature, and requiring his arrest. The order was given: “We want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic.” It also made it a crime for anyone in Germany to give Luther food or shelter. It permitted anyone to kill Luther without legal consequence. Luther escaped, hid for months, and later established himself and the Reformation in Wittenberg.

We see from this event that this principle of *sola scriptura* was at the very heart of the Reformation. Scripture alone and one’s own understanding of Scripture alone was what shaped and governed the beliefs and practice of the Reformers. It does ours also. If it cannot be shown in the Scriptures, we refuse to believe it. If it can be shown in the Scriptures, we are bound to embrace it. We affirm *sola scriptura*.

In the final two verses of our passage Paul set forth our responsibility to...

### III. Pray to God that He would comfort and establish our hearts (vs. 16, 17)

Paul wrote,

“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.”

Although Paul had written to them telling of perilous times before them, they were to experience comfort from God in knowing their eternal destiny. This confident hope should move them to order their lives in a manner that would please God. God the Father and Jesus Christ may impart this sense of well-being to the soul. For God loves his people and has designed their good and their glorious future.

There are some true Christians who needlessly trouble themselves respecting their souls. They are looking too carefully at their own souls even as they are failing to look more fully at what God has promised them in Jesus Christ. We are to pray that the Lord would bring comfort to their souls and that He would confirm them in their commitment to cleave unto Him in faith.

Let us affirm our confidence in the sole authority of the Holy Bible as our only source of truth regarding our faith and life before God. God has given them to us for our spiritual benefit and well-being. As Paul wrote, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

Let us also affirm what the Holy Scriptures reveal to us of God’s promise of salvation to us in Jesus Christ, that we may enjoy His comfort and be established in every good work and word.

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May the LORD give strength to his people!  
May the LORD bless his people with peace! (Psa. 29:11)

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### Appendix The Bible asserts its own Authority and Sufficiency

#### A. The Lord Jesus asserted *sola scriptura* (Mark 7:1-13).

The Lord Jesus asserted the principle of *sola scriptura* when he corrected the Jewish leaders after they had usurped the authority of the Scripture with tradition. The account is in Mark 7:1-13.

<sup>1</sup>Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. <sup>3</sup>For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup>When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, cooper vessels, and couches. <sup>5</sup>Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?” <sup>6</sup>He answered and said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:

‘This people honors Me with their lips,  
But their heart is far from Me.  
<sup>7</sup>And in vain they worship Me,

Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’

<sup>8</sup>For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men -- the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.” <sup>9</sup>And He said to them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. <sup>10</sup>For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’ and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ <sup>11</sup>But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban” --<sup>12</sup>and you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, <sup>13</sup>making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

### **1. The Setting:**

The Lord and His disciples were eating with the Pharisees and their scribes. A problem arose between the two groups. As the Old Testament prophet **Amos** asked the rhetorical question, so we might ask, *"Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"* (Amos 3:3). There was a fundamental difference between these two groups respecting the authority that governed their faith and practice, that is what they believed and how they lived. Inevitably an issue surfaced that caused a conflict (7:1, 2).

### **2. The underlying problem: The additional authority of tradition that was held by the Pharisees and their scribes (7:3-5).**

The Pharisees and Scribes would claim to hold to the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament), as did the Lord Jesus and His disciples. A problem arose, however, because the Pharisees and their scribes held an additional authority that the Lord Jesus did not recognize as valid or binding. They believed that the historic tradition of the Rabbis was as binding as Scripture. These two groups were governed by different authorities and this resulted in a problem arising when they came together.

I would assert that there cannot be true fellowship and cooperation in matters of faith and practice unless there is a common agreement that the Scriptures will govern the nature of that fellowship and cooperation. Unless this is agreed upon, in time, sooner or later, the group that has an authority not bound by the Scriptures will impose beliefs or practice upon them who restrict themselves to the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice. The result will be that the ones who hold to the Bible alone will be compelled to either object or withdraw, resulting in them being viewed as schismatic or disruptive to “cooperation.”

This exact scenario is what led to the Reformation. Roman Catholicism held to Scripture as authority, but only as it was understood and interpreted by tradition, the official teaching of Rome. The Protestants said, “No, but Scripture alone shall determine our beliefs.

### **3. The conflict: the Lord corrects the Pharisees and the Scribes respecting their authority (7:6-13)**

#### **a. Notice His directness and his charge (7:7, 8).**

The Lord Jesus taught that the Scriptures were the Words of God to His people that were to be believed and obeyed. The traditions were inventions of men that had no authority. They were hypocrites because they showed forth the pretence of walking before God when in actuality their faith and practice were governed not by God but by men’s opinions.

#### **b. The tendency to set aside Scripture when another authority is embraced (7:9-13)**

**4. The public proclamation:** The Lord instructs the crowds illustrating the error of elevating tradition over Scripture (7:14-16).

<sup>14</sup>And when He had called all the multitude to Him, He said to them, “Hear Me, everyone, and understand: <sup>15</sup>There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. <sup>16</sup>If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Jesus publicly repudiated the tradition of the elders. He asserted a conclusion drawn from the Scriptures. Jesus asserted *sola scriptura*.

We could examine many other places in which our Lord asserted this principle, but time will not permit us. I will simply identify some of them for us: Consider Matthew 21:42; 22:29; 26:54, 56; Mark 12:24; 14:49; Luke 24:27, 32, 45; John 5:39; 10:35).

### **B. The apostle Paul asserted *sola scriptura*.**

Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 3:13-17**:

<sup>13</sup>But evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. <sup>14</sup>But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, <sup>15</sup>and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>*that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

Notice that **verse 15** describes the Holy Scriptures as enabling Timothy to become “wise for salvation.” In fact, only the Scriptures can. God has ordained that His Word, which alone can bring life, be recorded in a book, the Bible. His Word alone, can make people wise unto salvation. This itself underscores *sola scriptura*.

But the main thrust of Paul’s word to Timothy was that the Scriptures were sufficient in and of themselves to enable Timothy to address any and all issues and problems he would face in the Christian ministry. The source of Timothy’s authority and assurance was not on some experience that he had, or some position that had been conferred upon him. But because God had spoken through men who had written down God’s words in a book, or a collection of books, which is the Bible, Timothy with the Scriptures could face his challengers. Now granted, much of the New Testament had not yet been written at this point, and the more specific reference of Paul is to the Old Testament books. But what is said here may be applied to all of the inspired books that God has given us, both the Old and the New Testaments.

God Himself had breathed truth and life into the very words recorded. The very words that the writers of the Bible recorded were the words that God intended for them to write. Therefore, the words that are written, are the words that God has spoken, and they were spoken with God’s authority. They may be relied upon as absolutely true and faithful. The Holy Scriptures may therefore be seen as equipping a Christian to face any challenge and overcome any obstacle that would stand in the way of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Specifically, Paul declared that the Bible *“is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”* In other words, the Bible is fully reliable and sufficient, so as to teach doctrine to the people, to withstand error and evil teaching, to correct errant understanding or behavior in God’s people, and to guide them in living rightly before God. This covers all possible situations that may arise in the course of living for Christ. Learning about God and His ways needs to take place in the hearts and minds of God’s people; the Bible is sufficient toward this end. Those who would oppose the truth or fall into error so as to be convinced of that their error is truth need to be reproved; the Bible is sufficient for this purpose. Believers make wrong decisions and choices in ordering their lives or they err in their

understanding of God's ways so that they need correction; God's Word is sufficient for this too. And then people must know how to live before God, ordering their thoughts, attitudes, and actions in a manner that pleases God; the Bible is sufficient for guiding God's people in the steps He would have them walk.

And so, we see before us a statement of the sufficiency of Holy Scripture to deal with any spiritual contingency that may arise in this life respecting ourselves and our relationship with God as we engage a hostile and evil world. A confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture was needful for Timothy to be born along by God so as to live for God and serve God's people faithfully.

There is a great need today for believers to be convinced of the sufficiency of the Bible to address all matters of faith and practice. We do not need gimmicks, or tell half-truths, or use modern marketing strategies or methods drawn from psychological and sociological research. God has given us His Word by which His work is to be conducted. All other resources are subordinate, in fact futile. Only God through His Word can accomplish His purposes in transforming sinners into saints, making them over into the image of their Savior whom they have embraced in faith. The man of God is "complete" when He has God's Word and possesses a good understanding of it. He is "thoroughly equipped"; that is outfitted with all he needs to conduct "every good work" to which God has called him. The Bible itself affirms *sola scriptura*.

Now, it is my assertion that as a church and as Christians, we need to hold to the sole authority of the Scriptures in matters of faith and practice. It is a watershed issue. We are reformed, because we hold to these principles. Although some may deviate somewhat from this principle and still be genuine Christians, serious problems will result if this principle is not maintained. One example we might cite of a well-known Christian leader is John Wesley. In many ways he was a great man mightily used of God. But he promoted a great deal of error, particularly his Arminianism which he championed his entire ministry. But his greatest problem in my opinion was that he did not hold to sola scriptura.

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