

Welcome to a Reformed Church

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Review

- Last week, we examined the perceived tension in Reformed churches between an emphasis on the *supremacy of Scripture* and the use of *confessions, creeds, and summary statements*.
- We saw that some of the tension is simply a matter of *terminology*. Every church has some idea of what the Bible teaches – some “statement of faith.” Frequently these are written down and published. Reformed churches always write down and publish our statements of faith because we *insist on being transparent about what we believe the Bible teaches*. The confessions, creeds, and catechisms of Reformed churches are simply elaborate statements of faith.
- We saw that the Bible itself *shows us the use of confessional summaries* of faith in such places as Deuteronomy 26.1-11, 1 Corinthians 15.3-5, 1 Timothy 1.15, 3.16, and also possibly Ephesians 4.4-6.
- We saw that summaries are very useful in evangelism because they *give us a basic map* for explaining/understanding the Christian faith, and very helpful in discipleship because they *unpack the essentials of Christian life* in the catechisms’ explanations of the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer.
- We saw that Reformed churches *treat their confessions as secondary to the Bible*. The only book members vow to be perfect is the Bible. Likewise, officers vow that the Bible is “the only infallible rule of faith and practice” and subscribe to the confession and catechisms as “containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.” In other words, we treat our confession/catechisms as a faithful map of biblical doctrine – a sort of theological-topical concordance to biblical teaching.
- Finally, we saw that the confession/catechisms protect both leaders and members from arbitrary church discipline. By being transparent about what we believe the Bible teaches, everybody is clear about what to expect and to what standard we are held accountable.

Chapter 3 – “Scripture: the Final Authority”

- The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was not about who did (not) believe the Bible. Both Protestants and Roman Catholics believe in the authority of the Bible.
- The real question, however, is: what is our final authority for Christian faith and practice?
- Put another way: where do we find the Word of God – where does the Holy Spirit speak?
- It is at this point that Protestants and Roman Catholics fundamentally disagreed then *and* still today. According to her own statements, Roman Catholicism teaches:
 - We “accept the Bible as the Word of God on the authority of the Catholic Church.”¹
 - The church “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.”²
 - “The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone.”³
- In opposition to this, the Protestant Reformers taught, and Reformed churches today still teach:
 - “The Scripture is the womb from which are born the divine truth and the church.” (Luther, cited 36)
 - “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 Spirit speaking in the Scripture.” (WCF 1.10)
- It is thus *in contrast to Roman Catholicism* that the Reformation developed its slogan, *sola Scriptura*.

¹ Louis LaRavoire, S.T.D. Morrow, and Emmanuel Marie Andre, *My Catholic Faith* (Kansas City: Sarto House, 2000), 21.

² Ratzinger, Cardinal Joseph ed., *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), §82.

³ *Ibid.*, §85.

- Though claims are often made to the contrary, evidence of the Protestant view has historical precedent. The church father Irenaeus (AD 130-202) wrote the following in his great work, *Against Heresies*:⁴
 - “Proofs [of the things which are] contained in the Scriptures cannot be shown except from the Scriptures themselves.” (III.12.9)
 - “When, however, [heretics] are confuted from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse these same Scriptures, as if they were not correct, nor of authority, and [assert] that they are ambiguous, and that the truth cannot be extracted from them by those who are ignorant of tradition. For [they allege] that the truth was not delivered by means of written documents, but *vivâ voce*: wherefore also Paul declared, ‘But we speak wisdom among those that are perfect, but not the wisdom of this world.’” (III.2.1)
- More important than history, *sola Scriptura* is taught in Scripture itself – in both the OT and the NT:
 - Explicit: Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 12.29-32, 32.47; Proverbs 30.5-6; Revelation 22.18-19
 - Implicit: Psalm 19.7-9; 2 Timothy 3.16-17
 - Danger: Mark 7.1-13 (citing Isaiah 29.13)
- The remainder of this chapter explains several important terms often used to describe Scripture:
 - Revelation: “We believe that the God who created all things is not unknowable, but is knowable in and through His Holy Word. In this Word, He reveals Himself, that is, shows Himself to us in a clear and open way.” (39)
 - “Why has God spoken? He is self-sufficient, and does not need men's gifts or service (Acts 17.25); to what end, then, does He bother to speak to us? The truly staggering answer which the Bible gives to this question is that God's purpose in revelation is to *make friends* with us.” (J.I. Packer, cited 40)
 - Inspiration: “The Greek word translated as ‘breathed out by God’ is *theopneustos*. This word emphasizes, as Peter's words do, that the origin of the Scriptures is in God's speech, not ours... God's revelation is amazing because it is personal. Furthermore, this intimate Word that God spoke to His servants through the ages was written down because of His personal love for us.” (41)
 - Canonicity: “The word *canon* comes from the Greek word *kanōn*, which is translated as ‘rule’ or ‘standard.’ In the ancient Greek world, this was the word for a measuring line, or what we might call a tape measure or ruler.” (42)⁵
 - Authority: “Two primary evidences confirm the Scriptures as the Word of God to us...” (44)
 - The witness of the Holy Spirit “by and with the Word in our hearts.” (WCF 1.5, 1Jn 2.27, Jn 16.13)
 - The self-authenticating nature of the Scriptures themselves.
 - “The heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.” (WCF 1.5) – all these things evidence “a supernatural intelligence.” (A.A. Hodge, cited 45)
 - Sufficiency: “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.” (WCF 1.6)
 - Perspicuity: “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all;(1) 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 the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.” (WCF 1.7)
- “It is important to note that almost every evangelical Protestant church in our day would subscribe on paper to these statements about the Word of God. But the real question is whether the confession that Scripture is God's inspired, canonical, authoritative, sufficient, and perspicuous revelation actually affects how Christians in any particular church practice their faith and live their lives. Simply stated, every church you may visit says, ‘We believe the Bible,’ but your response should be, ‘Show me.’” (47-48)
- The real question is *not* “Do we confess *sola Scriptura*?” – but rather, “Do we practice it in worship/life?”

⁴ Irenaeus is often cited by Roman Catholic apologists, who cite his teaching regarding the “rule of truth” (the preaching of the apostles passed down in the church). However, as these quotes demonstrate, a careful study of Irenaeus shows that he identified the preaching of the apostles with the contents of the Scriptures. See Jeremiah Montgomery, “The Rule of Truth in Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*” (paper, Greenville Seminary: December 5, 2008).

⁵ For more on the development of the canon, see F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988).