

“Scripture Alone—All-Sufficient and Complete”

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book IV, 8.9, 11, 15; 13.2, English updated and emphasis added.

9. Accordingly, Peter, who was perfectly instructed by his Master as to the extent of what was permitted to him, leaves nothing more to himself or others than to dispense the doctrine delivered by God. “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11); that is, not hesitatingly, as those are accustomed whose convictions are imperfect, but with the full confidence which becomes a servant of God, provided with a sure message. What else is this than **to banish all the inventions of the human mind** (whatever be the head which may have devised them), **that the pure word of God may be taught and learned in the Church of the faithful**—than to discard the decrees, or rather fictions of men (whatever be their rank), that the decrees of God alone may remain steadfast? These are “the weapons of our warfare,” which “are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4, 5).

Here is the supreme power with which pastors of the Church, by whatever name they are called, should be invested—namely, to dare all boldly for the word of God, compelling all the virtue, glory, wisdom, and rank of the world to yield and obey its majesty; to command all from the highest to the lowest, trusting to its power to build up the house of Christ and overthrow the house of Satan; to feed the sheep and chase away the wolves; to instruct and exhort the docile, to accuse, rebuke, and subdue the rebellious and petulant, to bind and loose; in short, if need be, to fire and fulminate, but all in the word of God.

Although, as I have observed, there is this difference between the apostles and their successors, they were sure and authentic amanuenses [those employed to take dictation; recorders, scribes] of the Holy Spirit; and, therefore, their writings are to be regarded as the oracles of God, whereas **others have no other office than to teach what is delivered and sealed in the holy Scriptures.**

We conclude, therefore, that **it does not now belong to faithful ministers to coin some new doctrine, but simply to adhere to the doctrine to which all, without exception, are made subject.** When I say this, I mean to show not only what each individual, but what the whole Church, is bound to do. In regard to individuals, Paul certainly had been appointed an apostle to the Corinthians, and yet he declares that he has no dominion over their faith (2 Corinthians 1:24). Who will now presume to arrogate a dominion to which the apostle declares that he himself was not competent? But if he had acknowledged such license in teaching, that every pastor could justly demand implicit faith in whatever he delivered, he never would have laid it down as a rule to the Corinthians, that while two or three prophets spoke, the others should judge, and that, if anything was revealed to one sitting by, the first should be silent (1 Corinthians 14:29, 30). Thus he spared none, but subjected the authority of all to the censure of the word of God.

But it will be said, that with regard to the whole Church the case is different. I answer, that in another place Paul meets the objection also when he says, that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17). In other words, **if faith depends upon the word of God alone, if it regards and reclines on it alone, what place is left for any word of man?** He who knows what faith is can never hesitate here,

for it must possess a strength sufficient to stand intrepid and invincible against Satan, the machinations of hell, and the whole world. This strength can be found only in the word of God.

Then the reason to which we ought here to have regard is universal: God deprives man of the power of producing any new doctrine, in order that He alone may be our master in spiritual teaching, as He alone is true, and can neither lie nor deceive. This reason applies not less to the whole Church than to every individual believer.

. . . the Lord is always present with His people, and guides them by [the Holy] Spirit. He is the Spirit, not of error, ignorance, falsehood, or darkness, but of sure revelation, wisdom, truth, and light, from whom they can, without deception, learn the things which have been given to them (1 Corinthians 2:12); in other words, “what is the hope of their calling, and what the riches of the glory of their inheritance in the saints” (Ephesians 1:18). But while believers, even those of them who are endued with more excellent graces, obtain in the present life only the first-fruits, and, as it were, a foretaste of the Spirit, nothing better remains to them than, under a consciousness of their weakness, to confine themselves anxiously within the limits of the word of God, lest, in following their own sense too far, they immediately stray from the right path, being left without that Spirit, by whose teaching alone truth is discerned from falsehood. For all confess with Paul, that “they have not yet reached the goal” (Philippians 3:12). Accordingly, they rather aim at daily progress than glory in perfection.

. . . I ought not to seem contentious when I so vehemently insist that we cannot concede to the church any new doctrine; in other words, allow her to teach and oracularly deliver more than the Lord has revealed in His word. Men of sense see how great the danger is if so much authority is once conceded to men.

13.2. . . . we should consider that we have to deal with God, whom our obedience so delight, that He abominates all will-worship [self-invented worship], how specious [deceptively attractive] and splendid soever it be in the eyes of men (Colossians 2:23). If all will-worship [manmade, humanly-invented, traditional worship], which we devise without authority, is abomination to God, it follows that no worship can be acceptable to Him except that which is approved by His word.