

SOLA SCRIPTURA THE GREAT BAPTIST DISTINCTIVE

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TEXT: Matthew 4:4; Romans 4:3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

The purpose of this lecture is to make some general observations on the subject of *Sola Scriptura*. It will not deal in depth with the specific issues of logic and irrationalism in modern theology, and will only introduce the subject of “good and necessary consequence.”

THE OUTLINE

The outline of this lecture discusses the three most basic questions concerning *Sola Scriptura*:

I. *Sola Scriptura*: The Essence of Baptist Doctrine and Practice. What is the significance of this one essential Baptist distinctive?

II. *Sola Scriptura* and the Use of Good and Necessary Consequence. Is it legitimate to logically deduce aspects of doctrinal and practical truth from the Scriptures?

III. *Sola Scriptura* and a Consistent Biblical Hermeneutic. What is the significance of a biblical hermeneutic that is consistent with the pervading principle of progressive revelation?

INTRODUCTION

There are several great Baptist distinctives which characterize the Biblical and historic Baptist position. These major distinctives include:

FIRST, The Scriptures as the only and all-sufficient rule of both faith and practice. This stands in contrast to other historic criteria such as religious tradition, ecclesiastical authority, creeds, church councils, rationalism and modern religious irrationalism which stresses experience and emotionalism.

SECOND, Believer’s baptism by immersion.¹ This Baptist distinctive derives from the truth of the New Testament as to both mode—immersion, and subjects—believers. There is no record of the immersion or sprinkling of infants, or the intentional baptism of unbelievers in the New Testament. On this New Testament distinctive, the Baptists stand in opposition to both Western and Eastern Catholicism, and traditional Protestantism.

THIRD, A regenerate church membership. This is distinctive of a true New Testament or Gospel church, and necessarily implies:

¹ There is one term used in the New Testament for baptism: βαπτίζεῖν, which denotes to dip, plunge, immerse, or wash by dipping. It derives from the root βαφ, which connotes depth. Had the inspired writers of the New Testament desired to convey the idea of sprinkling, they would have used the common term in the New Testament for sprinkling, ῥαντίζεῖν. For a more extended discussion, see footnote 31.

- That church membership is voluntary. A church that practices the immersion or sprinkling of infants and considers the church to be composed of both believers and their children is largely involuntary in membership and alien to the New Testament.
- That the membership is bound by a common personal faith and saving interest in the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (Acts 2:41-42, 47).

FOURTH, The priesthood of the individual believer. In the context of the New Covenant or Testament, there is no priest-cult or ecclesiastical mediator between the individual believer and His Lord. Every believer is “king-priest,” and has immediate access to God through the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1-3; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 4:13-10:18; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6).² The priesthood of the individual believer stands in the closest relationship to soul-liberty or freedom of conscience.

FIFTH, The autonomy of the local assembly under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The autonomy, or self-governing nature of each local body of Christ, presupposes four realities:

- The terms *Pastor*, *Elder*, and *Bishop* all designate the same office in the local assembly.³ There is no ecclesiastical hierarchy, or church office that exists apart from or beyond that of the local assembly.
- The New Testament does not teach an “Apostolic Succession,” therefore Baptists do not recognize any authority above the local assembly, except that of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and His inscripturated Word. Matthias replaced Judas to fulfill the prophetic Scripture (Acts 1:15-26), but no one ever succeeded the original Apostles of the New Testament era into that office.
- There is no extra-biblical authority that rules beyond the local assembly, such as presbyteries, councils, synods, denominational conventions, or national churches.
- The so-called “First Church Council” held at Jerusalem in Acts 15, although attended by the inspired Apostles, was actually a *conference* between two churches and possessed no authority beyond the agreement of the Apostles who attended.

SIXTH, Soul liberty or freedom of conscience. Only the Word of God can command the conscience of the Believer. It is foreign to the teaching of the New Testament to bind the conscience by religious tradition, ecclesiastical decree, or denominational standards; or attempt

² Cf. Heb. 5:5–6; 6:20; 7:1–25 for the perpetuity or everlasting nature of the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Cf. esp. 7:23–25. “unchangeable” is ἀπαράβατον, lit: “inviolable, untransgressible.” No Romish, Mormon, Jewish or Protestant priest can trespass upon the priesthood which our Lord holds.

³ “Pastor” (ποιμήν, shepherd) and “Bishop” (ἐπίσκοπος, overseer, one who exercises oversight) both refer to the work of the Gospel ministry—that of pastoring or overseeing the local assembly or flock of Christ. “Elder” (πρεσβύτερος, has the primary connotation of “aged,” then of maturity, seniority of rank, or a position of responsibility). “Servant” (διάκονος, used more concerning pastors than for deacons in the NT). (ὑπηρέτης, minister). (οἰκονόμος, administrator, steward). These terms are all used interchangeably in the New Testament for the ministerial office within the local church (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).

to enforce religious convictions by means of the civil authorities. Church discipline, or exclusion from membership and its privileges, is the extremity of church action.

All Baptist distinctives derive from the Scriptures, predominantly the New Testament. Any given church is therefore a New Testament or Gospel church to the extent that it conforms to the New Testament; conversely, to the extent that any given church departs from the New Testament, to that extent it ceases to be a New Testament or Gospel church.

I **SOLA SCRIPTURA: THE ESSENCE OF BAPTIST DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE**

THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

The Latin term *Sola Scriptura* was one of the distinctive features of the Protestant Reformation. It means “The Scriptures Alone,” and signaled the Reformed departure from alleged Papal infallibility and the authority of Romish tradition contained in the writings of the Church Fathers and oral tradition. Both Reformed and Baptist theology claim the principle of *Sola Scriptura* or the all-sufficiency of Scripture as the only rule of both faith and practice.

THIS TRUTH IS FOUNDATIONAL TO ALL THE OTHER BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES

As Baptists, we derive our distinctiveness from the Scriptures, and particularly the New Testament, consistent with the principle of the progressive nature of Divine revelation. This principle holds to the necessary finality of the New Testament over the Old (Heb. 10:1). The all-sufficiency of Scripture forms the foundation or inspired and authoritative context for all other distinctives that characterize our position. C. H. Spurgeon stated:

I became a Baptist through reading the New Testament...especially in the Greek ...If I thought it wrong to be a Baptist, I should give it up, and become what I believed to be right. The particular doctrine adhered to by Baptists is that they acknowledge no authority unless it comes from the Word of God.⁴

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

The authority of Scripture must necessarily be discussed in the context of both its sufficiency and our Baptist distinctives. If we hold to the all-sufficiency of Scripture as the only rule of both faith and practice, then we must do so intelligently and consistently, understanding the nature and significance of Scriptural authority.

FIRST, The Source of Scriptural Authority. The Bible does not derive its authority from its content, the validity or accuracy of its historical data, the uniqueness of its character, or even the internal witness of the Holy Spirit (All of which are vital or necessary). The authority of Scripture derives from God Himself. He is the Self-contained, Self-disclosing God Who has spoken (Gen. 1:1-3; Heb. 1:1-3). The Bible is therefore the very Word of God inscripturated.

SECOND, The Significance of Scriptural Authority. The word *authority* derives from the Latin *auctor*, which means author, originator, teacher. It connotes the power to command, to

⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*. Banner of Truth ed. I, pp. 148, 152.

require and receive submission and obedience. This term carries the status of ultimacy and finality. The Bible as the inscripturated Word of God is the immutable and ultimate authority as much as the Word of God spoken. Note the phrase: “*It is written...* γεγράφται, perf. “*It stands written* [with unchanging authority and force]...” As the very Word of God, the authority of Scripture is:

- **Necessary.** Natural revelation (God revealed in creation, history, and in the rational and moral nature of man) is insufficient for both unfallen and fallen mankind. Even unfallen Adam in the state of primeval righteousness needed special revelation or the word of God spoken directly to him for an adequate concept of reality and duty (Cf. the creation mandate, the commands concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and his duty to tend the garden of Eden, Cf. Gen. 1:26-28; 2:15-25).
- **Comprehensive.** It necessarily encompasses all of life and reality. There is no sphere of life or activity where the Word of God is not to be our guide (Matt. 4:4; 1 Cor. 10:31).
- **Ultimate.** Because this Word derives from God Himself, there is no higher authority by which it can be judged or standard to which it can be subjected! It is self-authenticating, intelligent and absolute. All other criteria or authorities are relative to the Scriptures. (Psa. 138:2; Isa. 46:9-11; Matt. 24:35; Heb. 1:1-3).

THIRD, There are five essential terms necessarily associated with the authority of Scripture:

- **Revelation.** God can only be known as He is pleased to reveal Himself. He has revealed Himself in creation, i.e., natural revelation (Psa. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:18-20), and in His Word, i.e., special revelation (Psa. 19:7-14; Heb. 1:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). This Word or Self-revelation of God has been inscripturated, or put down in written form. God is intelligent, non-contradictory and absolute; so is His revelation, both spoken and written.
- **Inspiration.** (2 Tim. 3:16, θεοπνεύστος, literally, *God-breathed*). Scriptural authority rests on inspiration in as much as Divine inspiration has given us the very Word of God in written form. Cf. Also 2 Pet. 1:20-21.
- **Infallibility.** “Incapable of error or deception.” The Bible is self-consistent and not contradictory. It reflects the intelligence or mind, and the nature and character of God Himself. Because the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it is authoritative and so necessarily infallible.
- **Inerrancy.** “Free from error arising from either mistake or deception.” Because the Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word of God, it is infallible and inerrant.
- **Canonicity.** The terms *canon*, *canonicity*, are derived from Gk. Κανών, and mean a rule, measure or standard. Secondly, these terms denote the body of Divinely inspired, authoritative Truth—the Word of God inscripturated—the Scriptures.

Early Christianity possessed the Jewish Scriptures, the writings of the Apostles and evangelists, a great body of oral tradition, and various writings styled as Apocryphal and pseudographical. From these writings early Christianity, with great care and by a stringent standard (or *canon*), recognized [They did *not* establish or form] a given body of writings as the

Holy Scriptures or the Word of God inscripturated. Canonicity, then, recognizes the body of revealed truth inscripturated and distinguishes the false from the true, the authoritative from the unauthoritative.

CONCLUSION

The doctrine of the Scripture alone—*Sola Scriptura*—as the only and all-sufficient rule of both faith and practice is the one great Baptist distinctive from which all others derive. This great truth stands as foundational to all other aspects of truth.

II

SOLA SCRIPTURA AND THE USE OF GOOD AND NECESSARY CONSEQUENCES⁵

LOGIC AND THEOLOGY

The use of logic to deduce propositional truth from the Scriptures is as old as Christian theology itself. Most early Christian theologians and scholars had been educated as philosophers and assimilated their principles of formal reasoning into their theological methodology.

Some have occasionally protested the use of formal deductive logic, convinced that it results in a form of *eisegesis*, or rather *illegitimate exegesis*, i.e., either reading into or deriving from the text of Scripture a meaning that is foreign or forced in its conclusion. This attitude is known as *misology*, literally, a hatred of logic.

This misology is particularly evident in some aspects of modern theology and its tendency toward irrationalism. The modern emphasis is largely existential, or experience-oriented. This is not only true of the Charismatics, Fundmantalists, and Neo-Orthodox; it has even made its entrance into modern Reformed thinking. A discussion of *Sola Scriptura* would be incomplete without some reference to logical thinking from the Scriptures.

AN HISTORICAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE REFORMED TRADITION AND BAPTISTS IN STATEMENT AND PRACTICE

THE WESTMINSTER AND BAPTIST CONFESSIONS OF FAITH

The first London Baptist Confession of Faith was written in 1644 and published in 1646. The Westminster Confession of Faith of the Presbyterians was first printed on December 7, 1646 and subsequently published in 1647. The First London Baptist Confession then antedated the Westminster Confession and was thus unaffected by it. The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith was written in 1677 and published in 1689. It is a “Baptist” version of the Westminster

⁵ Some years ago we gave a lecture on this subject which became the catalyst for further study and a paper by our Brother, Michael Czapkay, a member of our assembly and an M. Phil. at Oxford University, and now (1995) a tutor there and working toward his D. Phil. I am greatly indebted to Brother Czapkay for his further research and conclusions concerning logic and the irrationalism or *misology* [hatred of logic] that generally characterize modern theology and the use of necessary consequences. For further reference see the monograph by Michael Czapkay: *Are Baptists Irrational? An Examination and Defense of the Role of Logic in Calvinistic Baptist Theology*. A response to the rejection of the Reformed theory of “Necessary Consequence” in the book, *Are Baptists Reformed?* by Dr. Kenneth Good. This monograph of 140 pp. won the Clark Prize and, is available through the Trinity Foundation, P. O. Box 1666, Hobbs, New Mexico 88240.

Confession. The major and most well-known subsequent Baptist confessions—the Philadelphia Baptist Confession (1742) and the New Hampshire Baptist Confession (1833)—were both affected to a significant degree by the Westminster Confession.⁶

Although the two major Baptist confessions subsequent to 1677 significantly reflect the Westminster Confession, they do not include its language respecting “good and necessary consequence,” as noted below:

The Westminster Confession, Chapter I, Article VI:

“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...”

Contrast this with the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689, Chapter I, Article 6:

“The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is *either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture.*”

Note the alleged difference between the Reformed view of “good and necessary consequence” and the Baptist view of “either expressly set down or necessarily contained in Scripture.”

THE APPLICATION OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN CONTROVERSY

This alleged difference surfaced immediately in the latter part of the 17th century, the same century when these confessions were formulated. Note the words of Dr. Kenneth Good,⁷ who quotes from the Baptist historian Thomas Crosby:

That the above distinction has historical validity is borne out by an important passage from Thomas Crosby. Many public debates were held in England between Baptists and Paedo-Baptists in the latter part of the seventeenth century, and Crosby records some of these in detail. On one occasion (Feb. 22, 1699) such a disputation was conducted at Portsmouth, as he says, “. . . between the Presbyterians and Baptists concerning baptism. In the course of the debate, the words of which are recorded, the Paedo-Baptists refer with monotonous repetition to “consequences drawn from Scripture,” “good Scripture consequences,” “by good consequence,” “by consequence,” “the consequence of the major,” “at least consequential, it is sufficient,” “It is the good consequences I insist upon,” “good consequences from the commission are sufficient” “I am for consequences,” and “the subjects are to be brought in by

⁶ Cf. The following works for the Confessions, their doctrinal distinctives, their interdependence, and the dates of their respective publication, etc.: William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*. Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959; W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1912; Alexander Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards*. Edmonton, Alb: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992; Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 3 Vols.; B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981.

⁷ Although we disagree with the late Dr. Kenneth Good in this matter of “good and necessary consequence,” we esteemed him as a good friend and dear Brother in Christ with whom we had fellowship and the greatest agreement in the areas of soteriology and ecclesiology.

consequences.” Meanwhile the Baptists continued to insist simply upon specific Scriptures to which they made their appeal and which they frequently quoted.⁸

This situation seems to point out a major difference of approach to Scripture between the Baptists and the Reformed tradition in the area of “good and necessary consequences,” and implies that the Baptists were more scriptural at this point, holding to the all-sufficiency of Scripture, while the Reformed approach implicitly denied this by the addition of human logic. Dr. Good writes: “*The Reformed speak of sufficiency, but they add the theory of ‘necessary consequence’.*” (Italics his).⁹

THE TRADITIONAL REFORMED APPROACH TO “GOOD AND NECESSARY CONSEQUENCE”

What do Reformed theologians mean by “good and necessary consequence?” In commenting on these words in the Westminster Confession, the following Reformed writers reveal the essence of “good and necessary consequence.”

William Cunningham: “...*inferences or deductions* from scriptural statements beyond what is contained in the mere words of Scripture...”¹⁰

A. A. Hodge: ...nothing is to be regarded as an article of faith...which is *not explicitly or implicitly taught* in Scripture.”¹¹

B. B. Warfield: ...either by literal assertion or by *necessary implication*...”¹²

THE LEGITIMACY OF “GOOD AND NECESSARY CONSEQUENCE” AND THE POINT OF CONTENTION

FOUR CONSIDERATIONS

FIRST, The use of logic or formal, consistent thinking to deduce distinct statements of truth from the Scriptures is absolutely essential for any consistent or systematic approach to theology, preaching or the application of Scripture to the varied situations of Christian experience.

SECOND, Abraham reasoned from the spoken Word of God and acted upon this reasoning-by-faith when he offered Isaac upon the altar (Heb. 11:17-19).¹³ Mark how our Lord

⁸ Dr. Kenneth H. Good, *Are Baptists Reformed?* p. 109. Dr. Good quotes from Thomas Crosby, *The History of the Baptists*, III, pp. 314–353.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁰ William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p. 526.

¹¹ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, p. 39.

¹² B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, p. 226.

¹³ Cf. Heb. 11:17–19. God had told Abraham that his posterity and the fulfillment of the covenant promise would come through Isaac (Gen. 17:5–7, 15–19). Later God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:1–18). Heb. 11:17–19 states that Abraham reasoned (logically, intelligently) that God

used “good and necessary consequences” and deductions from the Scripture to establish the principle of doing good on the Sabbath Day (Matt. 12:9-13; Mk. 3:1-5). Note the same inspired approach of the Apostle Paul in referring to the matter of financial support for Gospel ministers in the use of the ox that was used to tread out the corn and the farmer who partook of his harvest (1 Cor. 9:6-14). Thus we have inspired examples of “good and necessary consequences.”

THIRD, The use of “good and necessary consequences” is not unique to the Reformed tradition. Baptists have historically acknowledged the use of deductive logic from the Scriptures. Note the 18th century Baptist theologian and scholar John Gill on the perspicuity of Scripture:

Nor is every doctrine of the Scriptures expressed in so many words; as the doctrine of the Trinity of persons in the Godhead; the eternal generation of the Son of God; his incarnation, &c. but then the things themselves signified by them are clear and plain; and there are terms and phrases answerable to them; *or they are to be deduced from thence by just and necessary consequences.*¹⁴

J. P. Boyce, Baptist theologian and founder of the first Southern Baptist theological seminary stated:

These constitute the sources of our knowledge of Theology, which are two, Reason and Revelation. . . . Reason is that power in man, which enables him to have mental perceptions, to exercise thought, and reflection, to know facts, to inquire into their mutual relations, *and to deduce logically, the conclusions which may be drawn from them.* . . . Reason may be used either with reference to the natural or supernatural means of knowledge conferred by God.¹⁵

A. H. Strong, another Baptist theologian whose Systematic Theology remains a standard work, wrote:

The Scriptures [and] . . . their teachings, when taken together, in no way contradict a reason conditioned in its activity by a holy affection and enlightened by the Spirit of God (The proper office of reason, in this large sense is (To estimate and reduce to system the facts of revelation, when these have been found properly attested. *To deduce from these facts their natural and logical conclusions.* . . .)¹⁶

FOURTH, The Baptist position of “*either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture*” necessarily and inescapably implies the deduction of “necessary consequences” as the truth of Scripture is appropriated in theology and applied to experience.

THE BASIC ISSUE

Some have objected to the principle of “good and necessary consequence” because it has been prominent in the polemics between the Reformed and the Baptist positions on baptism. The issue is actually hermeneutical and concerns one’s fundamental approach to Scripture.

would raise Isaac from the dead to fulfill the promise (λογισάμενος ὅτι καὶ ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγείρειν δυνατὸς ὁ θεός).

¹⁴ John Gill, *Body of Divinity*, p. 21.

¹⁵ J. P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, p. 46.

¹⁶ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 29.

The true point of contention is not specifically “good and necessary consequence,” but the general hermeneutical approach of Reformed tradition. The objections of Baptists and others against the persecution of Baptists and other Independents by religious and civil authorities, and the sprinkling of infants are neither “good” nor “necessary consequences” deduced from Scripture. They are rather the deductions of an “Old Testament mentality” which largely views the New Testament as a mere continuation of the Old. This issue will be considered in the next section.

CONCLUSION

Consistent reasoning from the Scriptures is essential for all consistent application. The proper use of “good and necessary consequence” is not a Reformed characteristic that militates against the Baptist position of *Sola Scriptura*, but is a necessity for the application of Scriptural truth in theology, preaching, and Christian experience. The basic issue is not “good and necessary consequence,” but an “Old Testament mentality” which, while maintaining the unity of Scripture, does not fully recognize its progressive nature and the finality of the New Testament.

III SOLA SCRIPTURA AND A CONSISTENT BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC

THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics ἐρμηνεύτικός, from ἐρμηνεύειν, “to interpret,”¹⁷ is the science of interpretation and is the culmination of Exegetical Theology. There are two basic questions that Exegetical Theology seeks to answer:

FIRST, “What does the Bible say?”—a matter of the reading of the text. This question is concerned with such issues as textual criticism, parallel passages, the larger and more immediate context. It takes into consideration an exegesis of the text in the original language, which includes the lexical, historical, cultural, and syntactical significance of words and their relationships.

SECOND, “What does the Bible mean?”—a matter of interpretation. Hermeneutics is based on the first question and deals with this second question. There is only one possible and consistent interpretation, although there may be several avenues of application.¹⁸

APPROACHES TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

There must be an attempt to formulate a consistent hermeneutic, i.e., a system of interpretation.¹⁹ The history of Christianity reveals the following attempts:

¹⁷ Ἐρμηνεύτικός is derived from *Hermes*, the god of Greek mythology who served as a herald and messenger to the other gods.

¹⁸ It seems to be a rather common fault of the pulpit that little or no distinction is made between interpretation and application. Thus, many are often led into thinking that the application is the interpretation.

¹⁹ For a full discussion of the history of interpretation and the various approaches, cf. The following works: Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House,

FIRST, the Allegorical or Spiritual. This approach seeks a deeper meaning than the literal or common and ordinary usage of the language (the *usus loquendi*). Any method or system is only in the mind of the interpreter. Such allegorizing of Scripture is necessarily arbitrary, fanciful, and often irrational.

This approach began with the Greeks and their ancient writings. It entered into early Christianity through Alexandrian Judaism, and especially the writings of Philo the Jew, who sought to synthesize Greek philosophy and the Hebrew religion by allegorizing the Old Testament Scriptures. This approach became the predominant method of interpretation until the Protestant Reformation. It was largely an attempt by the early Church Fathers to make the Old Testament a “Christian Book” by spiritualization, and so confused Old Testament typology with allegory.

Farrar points to the first instance in the Patristic writings:

...Clement of Rome [c.90-100]. This ancient bishop...is the first...who endows Rahab with the gift of prophecy, because by the scarlet cord hung out of her window she made it manifest that redemption should flow by the blood of the Lord to all them that believe and hope in God. As the pictorial fancy of a preacher, such an illustration would be harmless; but when it is offered as the explanation of an actual prophecy it is the earliest instance of the overstrained Allegory, which was afterwards to affect the whole life of Christian exegesis.²⁰

The development of the allegorical approach may be noted in examples taken from the Church Fathers, who finally applied it to the New Testament as well:

Clement of Alexandria (c. 155-220) taught at least five possible meanings in any given passage: (1) The *historical* sense, or actual and literal. (2) The *doctrinal* sense, or moral, religious and theological. (3) The *prophetic* sense, or prophetic and typological. (4) The *philosophical* sense, or finding meaning in natural objects and historical persons, following the psychological method of the Stoics. (5) The *mystical* sense, or the symbolism of deeper truths. An example of Clement’s approach to Scripture is noted in the following:

...[Clement] commenting on the Mosaic prohibition of eating the swine, the hawk, the eagle, and the raven, observes: “The sow is the emblem of voluptuous and unclean lust of food...The eagle indicates robbery, the hawk injustice, and the raven greed.”. . . Clement of Alexandria maintained that the laws of Moses contain a four-fold significance, the natural, the mystical, the moral, and the prophetic.²¹

Origen (c. 155-254) held that, as the nature of man is composed of body, soul and spirit, so the Scriptures possess a corresponding three-fold sense: the literal, the moral and the spiritual.

1969, pp. 19–39; F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961. 553 pp.; A Berkley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966, pp. 20–53; Bernard Ramm. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969. pp. 23–84; Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964. pp. 163–174.

²⁰ F. W. Farrar, *Op. cit.*, p. 166.

²¹ Milton S. Terry, *Op. cit.*, pp. 163–164.

Augustine (354-430) “justified the allegorical interpretation by a ‘gross misinterpretation’ of 2 Cor. 3:6. He made it mean that the *spiritual* or *allegorical* interpretation was the real meaning of the Bible; the *literal* interpretation kills.”²² He was forced into such an approach by his polemic encounters with the Manichaeans and the Donatists. Thus, he justified the use of force by the civil authorities to “compel” dissenters to return to the Catholic Church by interpreting the parable of the great supper to the “Church” (Cf. Lk. 14:16-24, esp. v. 23).

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) typifies the Medieval approach:

The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only (as man can also do), but also by things themselves. So...that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it. Now this spiritual sense has a threefold division...the allegorical sense...the moral sense...the anagogical sense. Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Writ is God, Who by one act comprehends all things by His intellect, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says (*Confess.* Xii), if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses.²³

SECOND, the Mystical. “Manifold depths and shades of meaning are sought in every word of Scripture.”²⁴ This approach not only characterized most of the allegorists, but included the Medieval mystics and such later heretical writers as Jakob Boehme (1575-1624) and Immanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) with his three-fold sense of Scripture: the natural or literal, the spiritual and the celestial.

THIRD, the Pietistic or Devotional. Pietism was a reaction against the neo-scholasticism and cold theological dogmatism that followed the Protestant Reformation. It approached the Scripture in a very practical and subjective way for personal edification. Such an approach characterized the ministry and writings of such men as Philip James Spener, A. H. Francke of Halle, and such groups as the Moravians and Quakers. Some Pietists and the Quakers claimed to be guided by an “inner light” in their interpretation of Scripture—an extreme view of 1 Jn. 2:20. Such an approach tended toward confusion, irrationalism and a mystical approach to Scripture.

Much modern so-called “devotional” use of Scripture violates basic and consistent hermeneutical principles, such as a complete disregard for the grammar or context of Scripture. E.g., Gen. 31:49 is used as a benediction, when it was actually a covenant between two deceivers who did not trust each other, and so called upon God to watch the other! E.g., In Psa. 118:24 the indicative “rejoice” is changed to the imperative mode and given as an exhortation. If one changes the grammar of the Scripture, he necessarily changes the meaning, and so speaks or writes without scriptural authority! E.g., Psa. 2:8 has been used as a missionary text, but the context (v. 6-9) refer this to the reign of the Messiah-King, who shall judge the nations! Care

²² Bernard Ramm, *Op. cit.*, p. 35.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 1, Article 10.

²⁴ Milton S. Terry, *Loc. cit.*

must be taken to make the absolutely necessary distinction between *interpretation* and *application*!

FOURTH, the Liberal or Modernistic. This approach, which denies the inspiration of Scripture, and reconstructs the contents and teachings of the Bible on a mere naturalistic foundation, includes the *Rationalistic* (The Scriptures approached by unaided human reason, with a denial of the supernatural. Destructive, rationalistic criticism of such men as F. C. Baur and the Tübingen school, Julius Wellhausen, and K. H. Graf, *et. al.*), *Moral* (The approach of Immanuel Kant, who held that the Scriptures were given for their practical and moral value only), *Mythical* (The historical truth of the Scripture must be freed from the alleged myths and legends, i.e., its supernatural element. This is characteristic of such rationalist-critical scholars as David Friedrich Strauss and Rudolf Bultmann.), and the *Accommodation Theory* (the supernatural element was actually an accommodation to the primitive or superstitious nature of the peoples and cultures of that time. The originator of this type of rationalistic approach was J. S. Semler.).²⁵

FIFTH, the Apologetic, Polemic, or Dogmatic. This is generally synonymous with the “proof-text” method of interpretation, by which various passages are asserted to teach or buttress a given opinion or theological position. Such an approach can be readily noted in any religious dispute concerning Christianity. It is historically prominent in such controversies as the Romanist-“heretical” debates of the Middle Ages, The Romanist-Protestant disputes of the 16th century, the Calvinist-Arminian debates, the polemical disputes between paedobaptists and Baptists over the mode and subjects of baptism, and the disputes among evangelicals over the “invitation” or “altar call” system, revival and revivalism, etc.

SIXTH, the Neo-Orthodox. The Scriptures are viewed as a *record* or a *witness* to Divine revelation and *not* the very revelation or Word of God. God is *encountered* in or through the Scriptures in a crisis experience. According to this approach, the Scriptures are neither the inspired Word of God nor is there propositional revelation in Scripture; God allegedly reveals Himself in an existential way.²⁶

SEVENTH, the Grammatico-Historical. This is the only valid, consistent and reasonable method of biblical interpretation. It is such an interpretation that is necessitated by and in

²⁵ For a discussion of the subject of Biblical Criticism and the influence and principles of so-called rationalistic or “Destructive Higher Criticism,” See: Wick Broomall, *Biblical Criticism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957; Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America 1800–1870: The New England Scholars*. Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1969; Louis Gaussen, *Theopneustia, or The Divine Inspiration of the Scriptures*. Grand Rapids: Kregel reprint of the 1841 ed.; R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canoncity of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957; Carl F. H. Henry, Ed., *Revelation and the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1958. Further study can be done in the various *General Introductions to the Bible*, such as the works by H. S. Miller, Geisler and Nix, and the multi-volume work by Thomas Hartwell Horne. Much valuable information can also be obtained from the many critical introductions to the Old and New Testaments. Cf. the *Old Testament Introductions* by such scholars as Gleason L. Archer, Jr., William Henry Green, R. K. Harrison, Merrill F. Unger, and Edward J. Young; and the *New Testament Introductions* by such scholars as Everett F. Harrison, Donald Guthrie, J. Gresham Machen, Henry C. Thiessen, and Theodor Zahn.

²⁶ Cf. the works by R. Laird Harris and Carl F. H. Henry in Footnote 25.

accordance with the rules of grammar and the facts of history. It is common-sense interpretation (i.e., adhering to the principle of the *usus loquendi*). It seeks no spiritual or hidden meaning unless necessary in the normal figurative, symbolic, idiomatic or typical expression of the given language, culture, or historical context of a given passage. It presupposes that God has given His revelation in an intelligent and understandable form.

GENERAL HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES

Within the proper, consistent, grammatical and historical approach there are general principles of interpretation:

- The perspicuity of Scripture or the Analogy of Faith, i.e., Scripture interprets Scripture. The more obscure passages are understood by clearer passages, presupposing that the Scriptures, as the very Word of God inscripturated, are not self-contradictory, but complementary.
- The textual, historical, theological, cultural and psychological context must be determined for an accurate interpretation of any given passage.
- Within any given passage, the words must be studied both lexically (as to their basic and subsequently-derived meanings) and syntactically (i.e., as they occur in a given context). Words are to be taken in their literal or common sense and usage (*usus loquendi*) unless they bear some figurative or idiomatic connotation.
- The use figurative language—types, symbols, figures of speech, poetic, parabolic, and prophetic references—must be considered in the immediate context and in the larger context of the whole of Scripture, culture and history.

Even within the historico-grammatical method, there are certain tendencies to be avoided: E.g., that of traditional, Reformed Covenant theology which tends to obliterate the distinctions between the Old Testament or covenant and the New; and that of a Dispensational hermeneutic which tends to divorce the Old Testament or Covenant from the New without proper regard for their unity. Our hermeneutic, therefore, determines our whole approach to understanding the Bible.²⁷

²⁷ Baptists have historically made what we believe to be necessary distinctions in both the unity and diversity of the biblical covenants (plural). Theologically and historically, we have held to the eternal covenant of redemption and grace or the eternal Divine redemptive purpose in Divine election and predestination. Reformed Covenant Theology holds to the unity of the Abrahamic covenant (singular) to such an extent that it largely denies the diversity. Dispensationalism, by utterly divorcing the New Testament or covenant from the Old, is characterized by an inherent antinomianism with its denial of the relevance of the law of God as the expression of His moral Self-consistency.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH²⁸

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

The Church of Rome has three sources of authority rather than a clear *sola scriptura* position: the Scriptures, tradition and the Church. Romanism considers the apocryphal books (The Old Testament Apocrypha contains 14-15 books) to be part of the inspired canon of Scripture, resting on some passages therein to buttress its peculiar teachings. Tradition consists of the writings of the Church Fathers, Church Councils, and various papal decrees. The authority of the Church rests in its claim of papal infallibility in all matters of faith and practice. It is the Church alone which reserves the sole right to interpret Scripture in the context of its own peculiar dogmas and tradition.²⁹

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

This refers to the Eastern Catholic or Greek Orthodox Church. There is no clear position of *sola scriptura*. While the Scriptures are held in high regard, they are necessarily interpreted in the context of *the mind of the Church*, rather than the individual adherent. Great authority is given to the Greek Church Fathers and to *Spiritual Fathers*, or priests and bishops for the interpretation of Scripture and its application to life.³⁰

THE REFORMED PROTESTANT TRADITION AND AN “OLD TESTAMENT MENTALITY”

There are two basic perspectives or approaches to the Scriptures within evangelical and Reformed Christianity: An “Old Testament perspective” that positions itself in the Old Testament as the norm and views the New Testament through “Old Testament eyes.” There is likewise a “New Testament perspective” that positions itself in the New Testament as the norm and views the Old Testament through “New Testament eyes.” The given perspective largely determines the interpretation of Scripture and its subsequent application to the life; the nature and character of the church as to government, its role in society, membership, ordinances, discipline, worship and even architecture; and even the very nature of salvation and Christian experience.

²⁸ The statement of 2 Pet. 1:20–21 that “no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation” does not mean that the individual has no right to interpret the Scriptures for himself, as the Romish and Orthodox Churches suppose. The force of the text and context is that the Word of God did not originate within the personality or will of the prophet, but came from the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ τοῦτο πρῶτον γινώσκοντες, ὅτι πᾶσα προφητεία γραφῆς ἰδίας ἐπιλυσεως οὐ γίνεται. ²¹ οὐ γὰρ θελήματι ἀνθρώπου ἠνέχθη προφητεία ποτέ, ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι.

²⁹ Cf. Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1962., pp. 75–103; 235–253; Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1974, 544 pp.

³⁰ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood, NJ: St. Valdimir’s Seminary Press, 1993, pp. 130, 146–149, 162.

The Reformed tradition possesses an Old Testament perspective, or an “Old Testament mentality” in its approach to Scripture. The unity of the covenant is held to such an extent that the New Testament is largely seen as a mere continuation of the Old Testament.

The Reformed concept of the church is largely that of the Old Testament covenant people of Israel. The tendency has been for state or national churches. There has historically been a reliance upon the civil authorities to enforce the discipline of the church with corporal and capital punishment. It was this “Old Testament mentality” that formed the basis of the infamous “Salem Witch Trials” (1691-1692) in which thirty-two people were executed for being “witches,” according to Ex. 22:18. Congregations are comprised of both believers and their children. The rites and rituals of the Old Testament are simply replaced by the rites and rituals of the New, e.g., circumcision is replaced by infant sprinkling, and the Passover by the Lord’s Supper.

This “Old Testament mentality” is the source of the argument for infant sprinkling and other like-issues, not “necessary consequence,” for infant sprinkling is neither a “good” nor a “necessary consequence” deduced from Scripture! It is rather a traditional idea imported into Scripture from Roman tradition and a process of arguing “from the covenant” in the context of an “Old Testament mentality.”

THE BIBLICAL AND HISTORIC BAPTIST APPROACH TO THE SCRIPTURES

The Baptist position is that of a New Testament perspective or a “New Testament mentality.” We stand in the New Testament and view the Old Testament through “New Testament eyes,” giving the proper place to the progressive principle in Divine revelation and making the necessary distinctions between the preparatory nature of Old Covenant and the finality of the New. We hold to both the necessary unity and diversity of the covenants, neither obliterating necessary distinctions, nor unnecessarily separating the New Testament from the Old.

We see salvation as strictly personal, wholly by free and sovereign grace alone, as the out-working of the Divine, eternal redemptive purpose (Rom. 8:28-31; Eph. 1:3-14). It is not related to any natural descent, or church and covenant relationship established by natural relationship or infant sprinkling. It is an individual matter in which there is a Spirit-wrought conviction of sin, a conscious, personal God-given faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and a conscious turning from sin in repentance (Jn. 1:12-13; 3:16; Acts 2: 36-42; 17:30-31; Rom. 3:21-26; Eph. 2:1-10).

The covenant-sign of circumcision has been replaced, not by “baptism” of any type, but by a sovereign act of God, a spiritual “circumcision of the heart,” i.e., regeneration (Rom. 2:28-29; Col. 2:10-13). As circumcision was the covenant-sign of the Old covenant for physical or national Israel, so “spiritual circumcision,” or regeneration is the covenant-sign of the New or Gospel Covenant for believers, or “Spiritual Israel.” Baptism is distinctly a New Testament ordinance. Its mode is immersion and its subjects are those who manifest a credible profession of faith, after the pattern of the New Testament.³¹

³¹ The traditional Reformed argument from Rom. 4:9–12 that, as circumcision was a “sign or seal of the covenant,” so is infant sprinkling, actually disregards both the statement of Rom. 4:9–12 and the

The Lord's Supper is not the fulfillment of the Passover. The Feast of Passover has found its fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 5:7). The Lord's Supper is a distinctly New Testament ordinance that centers on the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is to be observed "in remembrance of" Him. The elements are unleavened bread and wine. Wine is a symbol of joy (Psa. 104:15). The "bitter herbs" of the Passover, which were to cause the Israelites to remember their bitter bondage in Egypt have no place in the remembrance of our Redeemer and His glorious accomplishment!

We view the church as a distinctly new entity established as the God-ordained institution for the New or Gospel covenant, not an Old Testament institution carried over into the New (Eph. 3:5-10). The New Testament church is a local assembly, independent and autonomous under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, a professedly regenerate body in the midst of a composite society, not a monolithic institution in which there is one religion for the community. Further, the church exercises its own discipline apart from the civil authority, and the extent of such discipline is removal from membership, not corporal or capital punishment inflicted by the civil authorities.

It is from this New Testament perspective, "good and necessary consequence" or what is "necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture" may be consistently deduced.

CONCLUSION

The only proper method of Biblical interpretation is the one that deals consistently with the ordinary rules of grammar and the facts of history. In an inclusive sense, the only consistent approach is one that takes into account the principle of progressive revelation, properly comprehending the preparatory nature of the Old Testament and the finality of the New.

The Biblical and historic Baptist position may be characterized as a "New Testament mentality" that properly and consistently comprehends the principle of progressive revelation.

While we are ready to maintain our biblical convictions and uphold our New Testament distinctives as Baptists, we recognize our Reformed Brethren as believers and fellow-heirs of the

context of Gen. 17, which describes the institution of circumcision as a token or sign of the covenant. In Rom. 4:9–12, the subject is Abraham, who was circumcised as a *believer*. Circumcision was to *him, and to him alone*, "a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he [already] had yet being uncircumcised." In Gen. 17 Abraham is commanded to circumcise every male as a "token" of the covenant. This covenant had to do with the possession of the land of Canaan, and *not* with the eternal promises of salvation (cf. v. 7–10). Further, Abraham circumcised Ishmael (v. 25–27), *whom he already knew was not included in the covenant of promise* (v. 15–21). The covenant of promise (Gen. 12:1–3), as enlarged in Rom. 4:13–25, 9:1–11:32; Gal. 3:1–29 was made to Abraham's *spiritual children* (τεκνα Αβρααμ, Jn. 8:39) the covenant of circumcision, having to do with the land of Canaan, was made to Abraham's *physical seed* (σπερμα Αβρααμ, Jn. 8:33, 37).

The whole issue of immersion or sprinkling, infants or believers, can be further studied in the following works: Alexander Carson, *Baptism: Its Mode and Its Subjects*. Evansville, IN: The Sovereign Grace Book Club, n.d., 237 pp.; T. J. Conant, *The Meaning and Use of Baptizein*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977. 192 pp.; R. B. C. Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*. Watertown, WI: Baptist Heritage Press, 1988. 310 pp.; W. A. Jarrell, *Baptizo—Dip—Only*. Splendora, TX: V. C. Mayes, 1978. 113 pp.; Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980. 254 pp.

covenants of promise. We seek to possess a catholicity of spirit toward all true believers in the common bond of the Gospel and the glorious redemption that is in Christ Jesus, yet our convictions derive from the Scriptures after the New Testament pattern of our Lord and the inspired Apostles, and we understand that the closest fellowship flourishes in the context of truth.

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