

Lesson 3 **THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SCRIPTURE**

3.1 **Authority of Scripture**

3.1.1 The Authority Defined

The Scriptures are the inspired word of God, and are therefore infallible. This means that they are trustworthy and true in every respect, and thus without error. As such, they have divine authority, and demand unconditional submission.

The LORD addresses us with authority, commanding repentance and conversion, and acceptance of His promises. All Scripture is the very Word of God, Matthew 22:31; 1 Timothy 3:15. Whatever shortcomings appear in the text of Scripture only arise because of copyist errors and weaknesses in the process of transmission.

3.1.2 The Authority Accepted

3.1.2.1 Tradition

The Church has accepted the undisputed authority of the Scriptures since its birth. Although this is a crucial and important reason, it is not the most important reason for accepting the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. For the final basis of recognition lies not in the Church, but in the Scriptures themselves.

3.1.2.2 The Witness of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit works in, with, and through the one Word of God, confirming the divine authority of the Scripture in our hearts, Ephesians 1:13; 4:3, 1 John 5:7-9.

3.1.2.3 Self-attesting Witness of the Bible

Scripture asserts its own authority. All the prophets and apostles speak with divine authority, for example, Habakkuk 1:1, 1 Corinthians 7:10, 40, Titus 1:9, 2:10.

3.1.2.4 Fulfilment in History

The events foretold have been fulfilled, the New Testament fulfilling the Old, and are still being fulfilled (see the book of Revelation).

3.2 Sufficiency of Scripture

3.2.1 The Extent of Scripture

The Scriptures are complete, that is, they include the full and complete revelation of God. In them, we have enough for our salvation, and nothing needs to be added. We may not add or subtract from the Word of God, Galatians 1:5; Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32; Revelation 22:18,19; Matthew 5:17.

3.2.2 The Purpose of Scripture

The Bible has a distinct purpose, and in every way it answers to its purpose. It was written for our salvation, John 20:30. It does not exhaust the truth or the thoughts of God, but discloses enough for us to understand and be saved. It is sufficient for us, but does not exhaust

God's work, or all the thoughts of His counsel, John 21:25, Article 3, Belgic Confession. What we have received is accurate, and adequate in itself, but not exhaustive of God.

Because the Scriptures are sufficient for our salvation, both the preaching and worship of the Church must be careful to hold to them, and not exceed them in any way. We may not add our own traditions (Rome), or put our experiences in the foreground (Anabaptists, Pentecostal), Psalm 62:9, Romans 3:4,9, 1 Corinthians 4:6-7. Thus, Reformed worship strives to remain within the limits of Scripture, for example, in its use of psalms and hymns, the giving of alms, reading, prayer and proclamation, 1 John 4:1, 2 John 1:10.

3.3 Necessity of Scripture

The message of the Scriptures is necessary for the Church. Although God is mighty, and able to save His children without the Word, His rule is to gather His Church through Word and Spirit, see Lord's Day 21. The Scriptures have been entrusted to the Church, 1 Timothy 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:2. The Church is also born out of the Word, 1 Peter 1:12, 25; James 1:18.

The Scriptures witness to Jesus Christ. Without the Scriptures we lose Christ, and without Christ we lose salvation, John 5:39; 1 Timothy 2:5; Acts 4:12. The Scriptures make us wise to salvation, James 1:5f; 2 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 5:15.

3.4 Clarity of Scripture

Our confession teaches that the Scriptures are clear and their message is clearly discernable. In contrast to Rome (and many sects) the Reformed Churches hold that we do not need the interpretive

statements of popes or sectarian leaders in order to explain the sense and purpose of the Bible. The Scriptures are clear and sufficient in themselves, and everyone who can read must profit by them, if they are read with a willing spirit and an open mind.

One thing consistently required along with Scripture is the preaching of the gospel, which must always be bound to Scripture. Thus, the study and interpretation of the Scriptures is an ongoing task of the Church, Acts 8:31; 2 Peter 3:14f. Here again nothing should be added to the Scriptures or to what the congregation already has and can and does know 1 John 2:20. The Church has a vital role in the transmission of the knowledge of Scripture, and in that process of transmission knowledge will grow.

The apostles defend the clarity of the message in their own writings, Colossians 4:4; Romans 16:25f; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 2 Timothy 1:10. The Lord Jesus also promised clarity to His disciples, John 16:25f.

Exercises Lesson 3

I. Reference Passages

Study: Belgic Confession, Article 5, 6, 7.
Canons of Dort, Chapter I, Article 3; Chapter II, Article 5; Chapter III/IV, Article 17.
Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 7, 47.

II. Review Questions

1. What formula often used by the prophets illustrates the authority of Scripture? See Amos 3:8, 5:16.
2. How are the events foretold in the prophets still being fulfilled today? Give some examples.
3. If the Bible is clear in itself, why is continual instruction in and study of the Scriptures required?
4. Why are the Scriptures indispensable for salvation?
5. What is the difference between inspiration and illumination?

III. Extra Questions

1. Explain what is meant by a closed canon. Can new books (letters) be added to the Bible if they are found?
2. Do all the books of the Bible have equal value as God's inspired Word? Are some parts of Scripture more important than other parts?

3. How is the authority of Scripture attacked and undermined by many today?