

5. The Authority and Canon of Scripture

John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii-ix (1:69-96)

Douglas Wilson, “Sola Scriptura, Creeds, and Ecclesiastical Authority”

Introduction

Having considered the theme of natural revelation (God’s revelation in the created world) last week, we continue our study of the doctrine of revelation in this session with special revelation (God’s revelation in Scripture). In particular, we’re thinking about the divine inspiration of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, and the canon of Scripture (i.e. the question of which books belong in this Bible and why).

We’ll be reading two texts: a portion of Calvin’s *Institutes* (I.vii-ix), and an essay by Douglas Wilson entitled “Sola Scriptura, Creeds, and Ecclesiastical Authority,” pp. 255–286 in Keith A. Mathison (ed.), *When Shall These Things Be? A Reformed response to hyper-preterism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004).

Both Calvin and Wilson write within a confessionally Reformed framework, though of course in very different contexts. Calvin develops the theme of the necessity of Scripture and discusses how its authority may rightly be established, while Wilson addresses some problems that may arise from a misunderstanding of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone).

Wilson’s essay comes from a collection of essays addressing a heretical doctrine known as hyper-preterism, which is almost unknown outside one tiny sector of the North American church. This isn’t why we’re looking at the essay, so don’t worry if you can’t follow the details. To help you understand what he’s talking about, I’ve included a short introductory note below explaining what hyper-preterism is. But you don’t need to understand this issue in order to address the study questions below.

Outline

- Questions for reflection
- Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.ix
- A (very) brief introduction to hyper-preterism
- Wilson, “Sola Scriptura”

Questions for reflection

Think about these questions before your start reading. Try to identify what you *really* think about these questions, not what you think you ought to think.

- i. Why do you believe that Scripture the inspired and authoritative word of God?
- ii. Why do you believe that the 66 books of the Bible are exactly what ought to be there – no more and no less?

If you’re pushed for time, omit the questions marked with a *.

Study questions on Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii-ix (1:69-96)

1. What, precisely, is the nature of the “pernicious error” that Calvin identifies in I.vii.1?

2. How does Calvin respond to this error in I.vii.2?

For reflection: Take a closer look at Ephesians 2:20, the text Calvin cites in I.vii.2, and also at Ephesians 3:5. Do you think Ephesians 2:20 supports Calvin’s argument here? Why or why not?

In I.vii.3, Calvin discusses Augustine’s controversial statement, “I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the catholic church” (cited by Calvin on p. 76, footnote 6). Calvin argues that Augustine did not mean by this what the medieval Catholic church claimed that he meant.

*3. How has “that statement of Augustine” been misinterpreted by Calvin’s opponents (I.vii.3; cf. footnote 6)? How, in Calvin’s view, should Augustine be understood here (I.vii.3)?

4. According to Calvin, what is “the highest proof of Scripture” (I.vii.4)? How does Calvin expand on this in I.vii.5)? Do you agree with Calvin here?

For reflection: If Calvin’s argument here is correct, how should we seek to persuade unbelievers that Scripture is God’s authoritative word?

5. How significant, in Calvin’s view, are the arguments for the authority of Scripture outlined in I.viii)? In what context are they significant?

6. Can you identify and summarise the following arguments for the credibility of Scripture, outlined in I.viii):

- The content of Scripture (I.viii.2)
- The great antiquity of Scripture (I.viii.3)
- The miracles described in Scripture (I.viii.5-6)
- The prophecies of Scripture (I.viii.7-8)
- The character of the New Testament (I.viii.11)
- The testimony of the church (I.viii.12)
- The testimony of the martyrs (I.viii.13)

For reflection: Which of these arguments do you find most persuasive? Which do you find least persuasive?

7. What is the error of the “giddy men” whom Calvin criticises in I.ix.1? How does Calvin respond?

*8. How do the texts alluded to in I.ix.2 support Calvin’s argument?

9. In what ways does Calvin express the relationship between God’s word and the ministry of the Spirit? (I.ix.3)

Study questions on Douglas Wilson, “Sola Scriptura, Creeds, and Ecclesiastical Authority”

Douglas Wilson’s essay is one chapter of a longer book about a strange heresy called “Hyper-preterism.” You don’t need to understand much at all about this view to answer the study questions below, so please don’t worry if you’ve never heard of it before. The reason we’re reading it is that Wilson’s critique of hyper-preterism involves some helpful observations about the canon of Scripture, and this is the subject we’re really interested in. However, just to put you in the picture, here’s a brief introduction to hyper-preterism.

“Hyper-preterism,” which is sometimes called “full preterism” or (by its advocates) “consistent preterism,” is the view that all of the future-oriented texts in the Bible have now been fulfilled. All the events prophesied in the Bible, they claim, have now happened. Consequently, hyper-preterists believe that the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment and so on have all taken place – probably at or around AD 70, when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans. Hyper-preterism is therefore heretical, since it denies the orthodox doctrines of the future bodily resurrection of believers, the final judgment, and so on.

Hyper-preterism must be carefully distinguished from “preterism,” sometimes called “partial preterism,” which states that *some, but not all*, of the future-oriented texts in the Bible have now been fulfilled. All of us are preterists on some texts (like Isaiah 53, for example), but not on others (such as the promise of the general resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:50-55). The big questions arise with texts like Mark 13:1-31 – some people think this refers to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70, while others argue that it is about the last judgment. A “preterist” interpretation of this text is one that locates its fulfilment in the past. Evangelical scholar R. T. France argues in favour of such an interpretation in his commentary on Mark’s Gospel. The important things to remember are (1) that preterism is fine *on some texts* – indeed, all of us are preterists on some texts; but (2) only a *hyper*-preterist would make the heretical claim that the general resurrection of last judgment have already happened.

For more on this subject, see <http://northlondonchurch.org/2009/07/25/what-is-preterism/> and <http://northlondonchurch.org/2009/06/03/objections-to-preterism/>

Now let’s turn to Wilson’s essay. As you’ll see, he begins with a discussion of hyper-preterism, but quickly moves to the underlying issue of the canon of Scripture. It’s this latter issue that we’re interested in. However, there’s quite a lot in the essay that doesn’t concern us directly, so don’t be afraid to skip over the parts not addressed directly by the study questions. And feel free to omit the question marked with a *.

10. What, in Wilson’s view, is “the fundamental question” (p. 256) to be addressed? Why is this question important (p. 257)?

11. Why can’t a hyper-preterist simply appeal to Scripture to support his rejection of what the creeds say about the future (p. 258; cf. p. 265)?

12. Why does Wilson think that the tradition of the church is an especially significant argument against hyper-preterism (p. 259)?

For reflection: Do you agree with the argument Wilson outlines here? Why or why not?

13. In what way(s) do hyper-preterists misunderstand the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* (p. 260-262)? Why is this significant?

14. “Before we come to the word of God in Genesis 1:1, we come to the word of the church in the table of contents” (p. 265). What do you think of this statement?

*15. “The positions adopted within modern evangelicalism actually *are* the same as Rome’s teaching” (p. 279). What does Wilson mean by this? Do you agree?