

Biblical Methodology

Why the Sufficiency of Scripture Still Matters

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Draft Outline¹

I. Introduction

Believers often think of the sufficiency of Scripture primarily in terms of its relation to psychology and church growth, and mainly negatively even in those areas. Mostly, “the sufficiency of Scripture” is a fence that keeps secular intrusions out of the church. However, the sufficiency of Scripture is a much deeper and richer concept in those two areas, and has much broader application beyond them. This paper will seek to survey some of the areas where believers are working hard to apply the sufficiency of Scripture, but it will also suggest a series of areas where we are not yet working hard, and we should be.

II. Case Studies

The goal of the case studies is to see what successful application of the concept really looks like, and also to learn from the strategic successes and failures of those who have gone before us.

a. Counseling and Psychology

The revolution that Jay Adams began is now in the hands of a second generation, and is continuing to mature.

b. Church Growth and Professionalized Clergy

No corresponding revolution has arisen in response to the trends toward secularized church growth and professionalized clergy; however, there is strong, albeit decentralized, resistance to both concepts. David F. Wells offers some notable commentary.

c. Apologetics

Cornelius Van Til correctly observed that apologists were losing battles with unbelievers because they insisted on beginning by surrendering Scripture as the only sufficient basis on which to pursue the apologetic endeavor. By failing to take Scripture seriously at the outset, they also failed at the conclusion. Van Til and his successors have sought to correct this trend by attending to what Scripture says about the nature of unbelief and how to interact with it.

Francis Schaeffer observed that Jesus Himself said that the world would recognize believers by their love, and know that the gospel is true because of believers’ unity. He set out to use Scripture as the sufficient basis on which to

¹ Shortly before the deadline for submission to get papers onto CD-ROM for the conference, unforeseen circumstances arose that prevented the timely completion of the full paper. I do apologize; full-text copies of this paper will be available from me at tnich77@yahoo.com.

build his whole life, in order that his life, as biblical truth lived out before unbelievers, would be an apologetic in itself.

d. Origin Science

Henry Morris dared to take the Bible as the only sufficient basis on which to construct an understanding of science. Philip Johnson took a key element of Morris' revolution and went mainstream with it, in the process exposing secular culture's resistance to creationism as philosophical and religious rather than scientific.

e. Some Observations

Clarity is never a bad thing, but some uses of polarizing rhetoric can have a chilling effect on other believers' production within one's sphere of influence. Note how some of the pioneers above, notably Morris and Johnson, were immediately successful at inspiring other pioneers to "come play in their sandbox," while others, notably Van Til and Adams, spawned mainly followers and imitators, but few genuinely like-minded pioneers.

III. Some Observations on the Sufficiency of Scripture

a. Definition

The CTS Catalog statement reads as follows:

The Sufficiency of Scriptures. We believe in the complete adequacy of Scripture, for in it God has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness. We hold, therefore, that the Word of God by itself is sufficient to prepare a person for a lifetime of effective ministry.

b. Usual Applications

The usual applications of the above statement are to fields like those that Adams and Wells address. However, there's nothing in the statement that limits it only to those fields.

c. Expanding the Range

As we saw above, Morris, Van Til, and Schaeffer all made use of the sufficiency of Scripture in their respective fields of endeavor as well. The "lifetime of effective ministry" that the definition has in view could be the life of a pastor or the life of a geologist.

d. The Dominion Mandate and the Sufficiency of Scripture

The sufficiency of the Scriptures as a foundation for geology raises the question of how to handle extrabiblical knowledge. In the Adamic and Noahic mandates, God gives us grounds to expect that extrabiblical knowledge is absolutely essential to living a life pleasing to God, and also to expect that biblical revelation is the only sufficient foundation on which to build our knowledge of the world. Since we are all sons of Adam and Noah, these mandates continue to govern our theology and our behavior.

e. Why Revisit the Issue?

We need to revisit the issue partly because the applications we've just looked at are important, and are very much still under attack. We also need to revisit the issue because these are probably not the *only* areas where the church has been weak. There are other areas of our practice where we have not sufficiently observed this important principle, and we need to correct that.

IV. Fertile Fields for Application

a. The Province of the Church

i. Divine Guidance

Many believers harbor an unholy and unhealthy mysticism which leads them away from relying on Scripture for guidance.

ii. Hermeneutics and Exegesis

Many approaches to hermeneutics—even conservative approaches—fail to apply a truly biblical view of language, and fail also to follow the model Scripture sets forth for interpreting itself.

iii. Theology

Theologians regularly rush to judgment via predefined philosophical categories, rather than allowing Scripture to provide us with sufficient categories in which to think. We are all guilty of this; we only differ in our levels of honesty about it.

iv. Homiletics

Much of today's putatively biblical preaching fails not because it is too biblical for the audience to handle (as we prefer to think), but because it is not biblical enough. Truly biblical preaching must be biblical both in its content and in its methodology, but much of today's preaching fails to rest on the sufficiency of the sermonic models actually present in the biblical text.

v. Pastoral Ministry

A few years ago, Tod Kennedy drew our attention to areas of pastoral ministry in which doctrinal pastors in particular have failed to be sufficiently biblical in caring for their sheep. We need to continue to attend to this area.

vi. Evangelism

Both the chronological method taught by Trevor McIlwain and John Cross and the Johannine methodology taught by Zane Hodges, John Niemelä, and others have in common that they are self-consciously seeking to follow evangelistic precedents found in Scripture. They believe that Scripture provides a sufficient basis for evangelistic method, and they are seeking to uncover all the richness that Scripture has to offer an evangelist. Most of their opponents, by contrast, use cobbled-together, theologically-based methods that while perhaps biblical in their content, have no biblical precedent in their method.

vii. Ministerial Education and Training

One can scour the New Testament in vain in search of a seminary. While there is a place for seminary as a ministry to the church, churches tend to rely so heavily on seminaries that they are completely incapable of performing their biblical functions in the New Testament pattern. If Scripture provides a sufficient pattern for the training of future ministers, churches today aren't following it.

b. The Dominion Mandate

i. Introduction

As Genesis teaches and Morris' example illustrates, Scripture is not just the only sufficient basis for 'churchy' things; it's also the only sufficient basis for knowledge of the world. The areas I address here are chosen arbitrarily; they are the areas where I have some expertise, and therefore something intelligent to say.

ii. Language and Literature

There are some encouraging signs that the development of a distinctively Christian approach to literature is under way, but how much of it really takes account of a creation view of language remains to be seen. Failure to do this will ultimately result in failure to maintain our Christian integrity, so the language issue is absolutely critical.

iii. The Human Body

Generations of dyspeptic and flabby theologians have denigrated or ignored the human body. Scripture offers no shelter to this attitude; in fact, it provides a real foundation for seeing the human being as the ultimate athlete, and the body as integral to the human self. Christians have not even begun to mine the riches that Scripture has to offer in this area; unfortunately the pagans are way out ahead of us. There are "Christian" approaches to health and fitness, but with very few exceptions, these are really pagan approaches, gussied up with a few Bible verses here and there. There is little if anything that genuinely goes back to first principles—and yet, if Scripture provides us with the sole sufficient basis for an approach to the human body, it would be extremely silly not to do this.

V. Conclusion

Unique among the works of literature in the world, Scripture provides us with the necessary view of language and hermeneutics to understand it, and then provides us with the necessary view of God, life, and the world to understand everything else. It is the only foundation that is sufficient to ground an all-embracing worldview.

Having these riches in our possession, we *must* exploit them for everything they're worth, and expand our grasp of the areas in which Scripture applies.

VI. Appendix A: Annotated Bibliography

VII. Appendix B: A Proposal for Seminary-Supported, Church-Based Ministerial and Discipleship Training

Since there no seminaries in the book of Acts, there must be a biblical way to train future pastors using the church as the institutional base. This sort of idea could turn into an anti-seminary crusade, but that would just create more strife. Rather, the seminaries should seize the opportunity to stir the churches up to love and good works in this area. Seminaries are accustomed to viewing the individual students as the 'targets' of their ministry. However, seminaries should also see churches as the 'targets' of their ministry, and seek to equip churches to train their own leadership. This appendix will contain a framework for doing that, and a sample course plan to show how classes could be conveyed to the local church within that framework.