

# The Self-Sufficiency of Scripture

## *Is Church Tradition a Legitimate Authority?*

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### Introduction

In logic, there is a material fallacy called *ad verecundiam* (The Appeal to [Illegitimate] Authority). The appeal to authority become fallacious when the authority is (1) irrelevant, or (2) unreliable, or (3) unnecessary, or (4) when the appeal is dogmatic, or (5) when the appeal is uncritical<sup>1</sup>. An example of this is when celebrities are appealed to as authorities on matters of science as if saying, “We have the support of [Famous Actor]; therefore, you should accept this hypothesis as fact.” In matters of theology, many offer the explanation, “This is according to [church tradition/ the creeds/ the reformers/ what my pastor says.]” Appeal to anything other than the Bible for theological authority is fallacious because the Bible claims sole authority and humans are inherently fallible. We could word these two claims like this:

#### **Argument 1:**

The Bible claims that it is the only authority on theological matters.

Humans are not the Bible.

Therefore, humans are not an authority on theological matters.

#### **Argument 2:**

Humans are inherently fallible.

What is inherently fallible cannot be a valid authority on theological truth.

Therefore, humans cannot be a valid authority on theological truth.

An obvious question that arises as one reads these arguments is “Wasn’t the Bible written by humans, so it must be a fallible book.” This argument in syllogistic form would look like this:

The Bible was written by humans.

Humans are inherently fallible.

Therefore, the Bible is inherently fallible.

The problem with the above argument is found in the major premise: “The Bible was written by humans.” The biblical writers claim that their writings were delivered to them by God, so they are only the penman – not the author. For example, Tertius wrote the book of Romans, but the letter is considered an epistle of Paul because Tertius was just his scribe (Romans 16:22). Peter said, regarding inspiration, in his second epistle, “**But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God**” (2 Peter 1:20-21)<sup>2</sup>. Peter, later in this same epistle, recognized the apostles’ writings as Scripture (2 Peter 3:16).

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<sup>1</sup> *Socratic Logic*. Peter Kreeft (2014, St Augustine Press)

<sup>2</sup> New American Standard Bible is used throughout this essay unless otherwise noted.

Jesus said that He would send “scribes” along with prophets and wise men; thus, He was indicating that the scribes would record what the prophets revealed (Matthew 23:34). Those recorded writings make up what we know today as the Bible.

## Argument 1: The Bible Claims Authority

### Argument 1:

The Bible claims that it is the only authority on theological matters.

Humans are not the Bible.

Therefore, humans are not an authority on theological matters.

The minor premise within this argument is self-evident, so I only need to prove the major premise. I will take two routes in establishing the fact of the major premise: (1) an evaluation of 2 Timothy 3:16-17; and (2) an evaluation of the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.

**All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.** (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

‘Scripture’ in this passage is modified by the word ‘all.’ This shows that anything that can be considered Scripture is inspired by God. Also, this passage teaches that Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training the disciple – this includes every conceivable area of theology. Not only that, but this text also affirms that Scripture has been designed in such a way to bring men of God to “*ῥησις*” (artios – G739 – perfection, completeness). The Scripture is also able to equip man to every good work. This passage proves that the Scriptures are self-sufficient (i.e. that man does not need the Church, creeds, etc. to reach completeness or perfection).

All writings, however, are not included in this verse: just those that are inspired by God. This is the key element in determining what is considered a legitimate authority in religious matters. The Bible claims soul authority in that (1) it claims inspiration and (2) it sets chronological boundaries to the possibility of inspiration<sup>3</sup>. For example, the Holy Spirit’s miraculous presence is connected to Jesus’ absence (John 14-16). **“But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you”** (John 16:7). The Holy Spirit, as seen in the context mentioned above, would reveal “all truth” to the apostles<sup>4</sup>. The following argument will assist us in understanding this point:

The miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit are connected to Jesus’ absence.

Jesus was absent from AD30/AD33-AD70.

The miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit lasted from AD30-AD70.

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 22:18-19 is often brought up as an argument for the self-sufficiency of the Bible, but that passage only applies to the contents of Revelation and not all sixty-six books of the Bible. Just because an argument is used to support a true conclusion does not mean that the argument is valid.

<sup>4</sup> Note the audience of John 14-16. It is not you or I or to the disciples in general. It is a specific promise to these first century followers.

Some will question the validity of the minor premise in the argument above, but it can be cleared up through noticing that Jesus promised He would return within that first century generation, and His disciples would affirm that His coming was near before AD70 – i.e. the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the Old Covenant Age (Matthew 24:27-34; James 5:7-8).

The point of the above is that the Bible claims inspiration and self-sufficiency, but it also claims that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit (specifically, the revelation of all truth) were limited to the first century generation (from AD30-AD70); therefore, anything that claims inspiration outside of this time can be immediately disregarded as a valid source of authority.

One counter argument to the above comes from 2 Thessalonians 2:15. **“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.”** The argument is as follows.

The Bible says that we must follow oral tradition.

Oral tradition is passed through the church.

Therefore, the Bible says that we must follow what is passed through the church.

This argument, however, does not consider the chronology of the Bible. For example, one passage says that David is king while another says that Josiah is king. Which is correct? Both can't be king, can they? There is no contradiction between those two claims because they were both king separated by several hundred years. Likewise, this passage from 2 Thessalonians 2:15 is one of the earliest New Testament texts that we have, so Paul's claim that all Scripture is self-sufficient several years later does not contradict this earlier text.

## **Argument 2: Humans are Inherently Fallible**

Humans are inherently fallible.

What is inherently fallible cannot be a valid authority on theological truth.

Therefore, humans cannot be a valid authority on theological truth.

Anything that can lie cannot be inherently infallible. God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:8). Humans, however, can and often do lie (Numbers 23:19). To put it into syllogisms would look like this:

Humans are beings that can lie.

Any being that can lie cannot be infallible.

Humans are beings that cannot be infallible.

God cannot lie.

Anything that cannot lie can be trusted.

God can be trusted.

Humans are not omniscient, but God is.

Omniscient beings have perfect knowledge.

Humans do not have perfect knowledge, but God does.

In other words, humans are flawed in that they can lie as well as an imperfect knowledge. This means that a human may not intend to lie, but still give false information because of a lack of knowledge. God cannot lie, and God has perfect knowledge; therefore, anything that God says can be trusted. Humans who are not prophets, therefore, must provide some reason as to why they are trustworthy. In matters of theology, the source must be God, and since the miraculous gifts ceased in AD70 – as we showed above – the only way to prove a theological point is by going to the Bible. The Bible is our ultimate source of religious truth. The Church, traditions, etc. only serve – at best – as fallible commentaries on the Bible and should not be held at the same level as Scripture.