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# THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

TIMOTHY WARD

One of the most well-known biblical texts that informs the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is found in 2 Peter 1:21, where it is said that OT prophecy ‘never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.’ And that’s not all: 2 Peter also contains the significant reference to Paul’s letters as ‘Scripture’ (3:16).

In this paper I intend to go a little further into this epistle than just these two isolated texts, in order to make a case that the letter as a whole should be regarded as making an important contribution to the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. I’ll begin with a straightforward descriptive outline of the theme of ‘word and Scripture’ as it runs strongly and repeatedly through the letter. Then I will offer some analysis of how that theme functions with regard to both the content and purpose of the letter, particularly in relation to scriptural sufficiency. And I will conclude with some doctrinal reflections on sufficiency, building on this exegetical basis. In particular I want to relate these to Herman Bavinck’s exposition of the sufficiency of Scripture in volume 1 of his *Reformed Dogmatics*.

Central in all this will be a recognition of the purpose for which 2 Peter was written. At the beginning of chapter 3 Peter states explicitly the overarching purpose of this and also of his previous letter, which the majority of scholars take to be our 1 Peter. He says: ‘Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles’ (2 Pet. 3:1-2). In saying this, Peter is reinforcing by repetition a similar statement of intent from chapter 1:

So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things. (1:12-15)

Calvin comments on the first of these purpose statements, from chapter 3, thus: ‘By these words he intimates that we have enough in the writings of the prophets, and in the gospel, to stir us up, provided we be as diligent as

it behoves us, in meditating on them.<sup>1</sup> There is *enough*, says Calvin, in the prophets and the gospel, to stir us up—that is, to stir up believers to hold fast to the beliefs, virtues and behaviours which the letter urges on them. I am taking that as a historical precedent for homing in on what 2 Peter says about the sufficiency of Scripture.

A short aside on authorship at this point: in this paper I am taking the apostle Peter to be the author of 2 Peter. Of course this letter's authorship is among the most disputed of any of the NT epistles, but its composition by Peter still has its able defenders, such as Tom Schreiner in his commentary.<sup>2</sup> Someone who rejects Petrine authorship will need to judge for themselves the extent to which the arguments I present in this paper on the basis of the letter's content still hold true if in fact the letter was written after the apostle's death.

Before starting out on the first section, though, a comment on my rationale for this paper is in order. There are many who think that the evangelical Protestant doctrine of Scripture has historically been somewhat impoverished and distorted theologically because in their view it has been constructed too much in the abstract, and this in two related ways. First, it has not been sufficiently related to and shaped by the whole Trinitarian economy of revelation and salvation. Second, it has not been sufficiently related to and shaped by the gospel of Christ himself. These two criticisms were made, for example, respectively by Colin Gunton and Francis Watson, of a set of essays by evangelicals on the nature of Scripture<sup>3</sup>—and I think (saying this as the author of one of those essays) with some justification.<sup>4</sup>

I would add a third and related problem of impoverishment and distortion within the historic evangelical doctrine of Scripture. Especially in its more popular formulations (although not exclusively there), it has not been sufficiently shaped by a close reading of the many biblical passages which give expression to it. This is of course, to say the least, profoundly ironic. I take it that, as with any biblical doctrine, our doctrinal formula-

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on 2 Peter*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 413.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing, 2003), pp. 255-76.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Gunton, 'Trinity and Trustworthiness', and Francis Watson, 'An Evangelical Response', in *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the Nature of Scripture*, ed. by Paul Helm & Carl Trueman (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), respectively pp. 275-84 & 285-89.

<sup>4</sup> My own *Words of Life: Scripture as the living and active word of God* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009) outlines a doctrine of Scripture in a form that attempts to pay some attention to criticisms such as Gunton's and Watson's.

tion needs to take its shape and contours, its polemical and applicational edge, and its relatedness to other topics of doctrine, from the way in which all those elements are presented in Scripture itself. I have a memory of reading somewhere a comment by Geoffrey Wainwright, to the effect that what is needed is less abstract musing and debating about the doctrine of Scripture and more responsible exegesis of what Scripture says of itself. Even if my memory is faulty and Wainwright has never written such a thing, I think the point is a good one, and it is why I am offering this little bit of theological exegesis leading to doctrinal reflection, on the basis of one small part of Scripture.

Indeed, this third kind of distortion within the evangelical doctrine is bound up with the previous two. When the authors of Scripture have something to say about the nature of Scripture, their point is very often in the service of some more wide-ranging and fundamental statement about the character and actions of the triune God and the shape of faithful Christian discipleship. A doctrine of Scripture consciously shaped by careful exegesis of longer sections of Scripture therefore stands a better chance of being rightly theological and christological. I trust that this will become evident, as we now look more closely at 2 Peter, starting with a straightforward description.

## I. WORD AND SCRIPTURE IN 2 PETER: DESCRIPTION

The letter is topped and tailed with significant references to 'knowledge' and 'grace'. Chapter 1, verse 2 says: 'Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord'; and the closing verse, 3:18, is: 'But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.' This grace and knowledge are closely intertwined in the opening verses of what I will argue is functionally the letter's central section, 1:3-11. As the letter unfolds, it turns out that this section is setting out in tightly packed form the fundamental message to which Peter is urging the letter's recipients to hold fast; later he will refer back to it as 'the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles' (3:2). Grace is initially expounded as the divine power which 'has given us everything we need for a godly life', and this power is given to believers in and through their *knowledge* of God (1:3). The subsequent verse, v. 4, says more about this knowledge: through God's glory and goodness 'he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature'. The meaning of that very Hellenistic notion of 'participation in the divine nature' has been much debated. The reference in the second half of verse 4 to an escape from the corruption of sin, along with the moral exhortations in verses 5-8, provides an

immediate context which points strongly to the participation in view here being a sharing in God's moral excellence rather than any additional form of divinisation.

In the wider context of the letter, God's 'promises' in verse 4 will turn out to refer to the future coming again of Christ as saviour and judge. For now, the point to notice is the close parallel drawn between the function of God's *power* and his *promises*: both are said to be means by which God gives what is needed for godly living in the new age, in imitation of his own holiness. Moreover, the move in verses 3 and 4 from knowledge of Christ to divine promises suggests that it is through his promises that our knowledge of him comes.

In the second half of chapter 1, Peter expresses for the first time his purpose in all this, and then sets out the basis of his authority for saying these things. In verses 12-15 he says that he knows that he will soon die, and that he will make every effort to ensure that his readers will always be able to remember these things after his death. 'These things' is presumably the content of verses 3-11. 'Reminding' and 'remembering' are central themes in this letter. As the church moves into the post-apostolic era and finds, as this letter will make explicit, that false teaching arises even from within its own ranks, the fundamental defence strategy against that danger which the apostle will bequeath is a body of teaching and exhortation, as summarised in verses 3-11, to be kept constantly in memory.

Commentators puzzle a little over the future tense at the beginning of verse 15: 'I *will make every effort* to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.' What could Peter mean by that, in light of his imminent death? From the mouth and pen of an apostle with only a short time to live it is certainly a powerful piece of rhetoric. In addition, it may be that a robustly canonical interpretation of the verse sees in it something that is in line with while probably also exceeding Peter's conscious intention—namely, that for future generations of Christians, beyond the immediate post-apostolic generation, a constant calling to mind of the gospel that is summarised in 1:3-4 and preached in 1:5-11 will be sufficient defence against the temptations of false gospels and godless living.

In the subsequent verses, 1:16-21, Peter sets out his authoritative basis for asserting the certainty of the future parousia, which is what he is about to do in the face of false teachers who deny it. In successive sections he says that in two different ways *God has spoken* about the parousia. First, God spoke at the Transfiguration. Peter speaks (1:16) of himself and two of the other apostles as 'eye-witnesses of his majesty'. However what he wants to emphasise most strongly about what they witnessed is what they heard rather than saw (1:18). His choice of words stresses the divinity of

the speaker: 'the voice came to him [*sc.* Christ] from the Majestic Glory' (1:17). Richard Bauckham has argued, I think rightly, that Peter (in fact, according to Bauckham, the post-apostolic writer presenting himself as Peter in a transparent fiction) introduces the Transfiguration at this point not as a revelation of Jesus' divinity but as a forward-looking vision of the kingly Son of Man who will return one day as God's appointed eschatological judge.<sup>5</sup> In light of what follows in this letter, that is surely right. The apostles witnessed first-hand the Father's affirmation of Jesus' eschatological role, and so were not myth-making when they taught the future coming of Christ in glory.

Second, God has spoken in OT prophecy. The 'prophetic word' or 'message' of 1:19 may well refer to the whole of the OT, in light of Jewish usage which extended the term 'prophecy' beyond what we customarily think of as the strictly prophetic books. Verses 20-21 are of course one of the commonly offered proof-texts for divine inspiration of Scripture, that is, for the ultimate divine origin of Scripture. What is important to note here for our purposes is that Peter expresses this fact in order to give a second instance of an entirely reliable statement about the future coming of Christ. It is entirely reliable because the will which produced it was God's, not man's.

Peter makes a remarkable statement about the present function of these divine promises in Scripture, and in so doing gives the letter's first clear reference to the parousia, in verse 19: 'and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.' This most likely alludes to a poetic description in the book of Numbers of the Messiah as a star who 'will come out of Jacob' (Num. 24:17). Peter says of the OT message of the coming of the Messiah that it is a light that shines in the present darkness until (elaborating on the metaphor of light) the future eschatological age dawns in the coming again of Christ (v. 19). On that day the lamp of Scripture will no longer be needed because the light himself will have come in the dawning of his eternal day. Scripture is therefore necessary (to stray into a related attribute of Scripture), but only for a limited period within salvation history. When the glory of God gives light to the heavenly city and the Lamb is its lamp, to use the language of Revelation 21:23, such that neither the sun nor moon are needed to shine, then presumably the light shed by Scripture is no longer needed, just as the street-lights turn off when the sun rises.

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 50 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), pp. 216-22.

In the long and graphic descriptions of the false teachers in chapter 2, Peter makes particular mention of their ‘destructive heresies’ (2:1) and ‘false words’ (ESV) or ‘fabricated stories’ (NIV 2011), (2:3). These falsehoods are set in explicit contrast to what Peter has described as the apostles’ truthful and reliable testimony of Christ.

The beginning of chapter 3 recapitulates, as we have already seen, the explicit purpose of the letter: that the recipients should arm themselves against being led astray either into false teaching that denies the return of Christ or into godless living that calls down God’s judgment, and that they should do so by a constant, deliberate recall both of what the OT foretold of Christ and of what Christ has said in and through the apostles’ teaching.

Chapter 3 continues by pointing out the short-sightedness of those who deny the return of Christ in light of God’s past dealings with his creation. Peter speaks (v. 5) of creation taking place ‘by God’s word’, referring especially to the establishing of order in the physical realm out of watery chaos. It is likely that God’s word is there again in verse 6 (as in ESV and *contra* NIV 2011), with both the water and word from the end of verse 5 referred to in the opening words of verse 6: δι’ ὧν. However that may be, God’s word is indisputably there again in verse 7, where the argument is this: in view of God’s past creative and judging interventions by his word, at creation and in the flood, it is only a fool who imagines that God’s word is not now at work ‘keeping’ or ‘reserving’ the creation and humanity for a future definitive, purifying judgment and re-creation. This overarching context puts the right perspective on the Lord’s *promise*, referred to again in 3:9, alluding right back to 1:4. It is this context of God’s past work by his word that the false teachers are said deliberately to forget (3:5).

Peter is now heading to the close of the letter. He will end with two imperatives which encapsulate his concern throughout: be on your guard not to be carried away by error and so lose your secure position, and grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (3:17-18a). Just before he gets there, he acknowledges that his recipients have seen letters from Paul which say similar things to his own teaching about the parousia (3:15b-16). In so doing he famously puts Paul’s letters in the same category as τὰς λοιπὰς γραφὰς. This is not yet evidence of a complete NT canon, but is certainly an indication of (some of) Paul’s letters being regarded without controversy as Scripture by whatever period one wishes to date 2 Peter in (an issue which I will not get into here!). Crucially Peter adds that Paul wrote, as the NIV 2011 puts it, ‘with the wisdom that God gave him’ (3:15). That translation confidently but probably rightly interprets what is a passive form in the Greek—literally, ‘according to the wisdom given to him’—as a divine passive, with God as the implied giver

of the wisdom by which Paul wrote his letters. On the previous occasions in this letter when Peter has referred to Scripture he was at pains to point out that its true origin was not human but divine. He has done just that with the OT prophets as carried along by the Holy Spirit, with the apostles' first-hand testimony to the Father's voice at the Transfiguration, and with the command of Christ through the apostles. (Incidentally, in these three instances from 2 Peter we have in each case a reference to a different person of the Trinity: the Spirit in the OT prophets, the Father at the Transfiguration and Christ through the apostles.) It is likely, therefore, that this pattern continues when Peter refers at the end here to Paul's letters. This suggests that Paul's writing 'according to divine wisdom' is a further phrase by which Scripture's divine origin is expressed in this letter. Scripture has more than one way of articulating what we term the doctrine of inspiration.

Thus far the description of the theme of word and Scripture in 2 Peter; now some analysis.

## II. WORD AND SCRIPTURE IN 2 PETER: ANALYSIS

I have five analytical observations to make about this word/Scripture theme in 2 Peter.

### ***1) God's power is strongly correlated with his speech.***

Verses 3 and 4 of chapter 1 function, I suggest, in parallel. According to verse 3, God's power has given believers everything they need for life and godliness, and many interpreters take this to be a hendiadys for 'godly living'. The moral excellence of the life to which believers have been called by God is referred to again at the end of the verse, if (with RSV and ESV) we translate the final phrase of verse 3 as saying that God called believers 'to' rather than 'by' 'his own glory and excellence'. Some contextual evidence for that as a likely correct translation may be found in the fact that this glory and excellence of God function in the following section more as the nature of the goal towards which believers have been called by God, rather than as the instrument by which they are called.

Verse 4 is then noticeably parallel in structure. In both verses something is said to be given by which believers may be godly. Thus in verse 4 participation in the divine nature, which presumably starts already in the present to the extent that the fruit of the Spirit shows itself in the life of the believer, matches the divine glory and excellence or goodness to which we are called. And the sufficiency of the divine power which in verse 3 is said to be given for godly living is similarly matched with the 'very great and precious promises' which have also been given in order that believers may



live godly lives. It is not that the divine power given in verse 3 is reduced to mere words, and of course it is best taken as Peter's way of referring to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit by virtue of the believer's union with Christ by faith. However the giving of that divine power is very intimately intertwined with the giving of God's promises, to the extent that in both power and promises everything has been given that the believer needs in order to live out subjectively his objective rescue from the corruption of sin.

This is of course a common theme in the NT, and Peter expresses here what is found, for example, in different language in John 15:3-8. There Jesus is recorded as saying:

You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me *as I also remain in you*. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and *I in you*, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me *and my words remain in you*, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (italics added)

One common feature of Jesus' discourses in John's Gospel is the repetition of a theme from different perspectives and in different words; commentators often think that such linguistic variation is primarily for stylistic reasons. In this passage there seems to be no good reason for thinking that language of Christ's *words* remaining in the believer refers to anything substantively different from language of Christ *himself* remaining in them.

## ***2) God's speech is strongly correlated with what is given us in Scripture.***

I suggest that this is evident in another parallel within the letter, in chapter 3. Here we find, in the structure of the chapter as a whole, a functional parallel drawn between, on the one hand, the divine word which Peter stresses was at work in creation and the flood, and on the other the wisdom given by God to Paul that he expressed in his scriptural letters. The 'scoffers' of chapter 3 are deriding any notion that Christ will return as the glorious judge and saviour. Precisely in so doing, says Peter, they are ironically making themselves liable for the very eschatological judgment that they deny will occur. He describes their fatal error in very specific and noteworthy terms: they deliberately forget (or overlook, 3:5), he says, that in the past, in creation and the flood, God has acted cataclysmically by means of water and most particularly by means of word. These past

undeniable actions by means of his *word* give solid grounds for regarding God's existing *promise* of Christ's return as trustworthy. God has always acted in a manner that is faithful to his word and by means of his word, and so he ought to be trusted to do so in the future, in accordance with his promises about the powerful coming again of Christ.

Then later in chapter 3 it is this very promise and God's merciful reasons for delaying the parousia which Paul is said to have written about. Peter adds pointedly that anyone who distorts the Scriptures authored by Paul or by anyone else is, by that very act, putting themselves in line for eschatological judgment. This is the same judgment that the parousia-deniers whom Peter refers to were facing, and for the same reasons. To distort the wisdom given by God to Paul and expressed in his letters seems to be set up here as parallel to the scoffers' twisting of the two great actions which God performed by his word in the past; both are acts of ignorant opposition to God's word, and both will have the same dreadful eschatological outcome.

When we read chapter 3 as a coherent whole in this way, I suggest that it then becomes evident that the apparent aside on Paul's letters, coming just before the final exhortatory summary, can be explained as in fact a rather important climax. It lays bare for the immediate post-apostolic generation, and indeed for all subsequent generations, that the error of the scoffers of Peter's day can sadly be perpetuated in the future, and that one fundamental form that that error will take is the distortion of God's word, the Scriptures. Such distortion of God's word is sufficient for God's condemnation—because, as we have seen, in God's power and in his promises, and in the apostolic message summarised by 1:3-11, can be found everything a believer needs in order to hold firm in faith and life to the end.

### **3) *Peter's own letter begins to occupy the same role as other Scriptures.***

I am suggesting here that, although Peter does not argue explicitly for the divine origin of his own words, he speaks about the function and content of the letter in terms which put it significantly on the same level as those utterances which he does refer to as divine speech. He ascribes, as we have seen, a clearly divine origin to three kinds of material: OT prophecy, and perhaps also by extension the whole of the OT, which he says has its origins in God's will and not in human will; Paul's letters, whose content comes from the wisdom that God gave to Paul; and the command of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, which he gave to the recipients of Peter's letter through those whom he calls 'your apostles' (3:2), who presumably are the particular apostles of whom they were most aware and with whose teaching they had had most direct contact. All three of these—OT proph-

ecy, Paul's letters, apostolic teaching— are instances of divine speech expressed through human agency in a manner that does not extinguish but takes hold of every aspect of the humanity of the writers, save for sin, which is how the evangelical doctrine of inspiration has most commonly spoken of God's words coming through human means. As we have seen, denying or twisting the content of these things is sufficient for bringing God's final condemnation on oneself. Therefore being careful to recall the content of these things and to put them into increasing practice is sufficient for what Peter calls variously making one's calling and election sure, never falling, being welcomed richly into Christ's eternal kingdom (1:10-11), being found spotless, blameless and at peace with him in a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness (3:13-14), and ultimately not falling away from one's secure position (3:17).

Through the letter Peter makes clear that the same eternal outcome is at stake with the reception of his words among the letter's recipients. Recall of and obedience to the apostolic message that he sets out in summary form in 1:3-11 is what is needed to avoid falling into acceptance of the dangerous heresies and destructive lifestyles of his opponents. It is needed if the believers are to confirm their standing with the Lord by growing in grace and knowledge of Christ, thereby giving glory to him both now and on the day of his return. That same section, 1:3-11, seems to function also as a summary of what he calls in chapter 3 'the command given by our Lord and Saviour' (3:2). Moreover, the eye-witness testimony Peter gives in this letter to the Transfiguration, in which he records the Father's implicit assertion of Christ's future eschatological role, becomes another expression of God's promise by which believers may come to participate in the divine nature. In other words, at least part of what Peter writes in this letter is implicitly taken up *within the letter itself* into the category of divine promise. According to Peter, to overlook what this letter says puts one at the same risk of divine judgment incurred by not paying attention to the light which has been shone into the darkness by the OT, and the same risk incurred by twisting the Scriptures—and for the same reasons, too, because it distorts and denies what God has given in his promise.

I need to be clear that these observations have only a limited scope. No claim is being made about Peter's awareness or otherwise of himself as an author of Scripture, and we are still a long way from a full NT canon. But I suggest that what I have pointed to is some evidence in this small text within Scripture of the author's understanding of both the content and purpose of his text as naturally scriptural. What later became the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture arises appropriately out of the role and function which biblical authors articulated in their texts for their texts.

The fourth observation builds on these first three, now being explicit about sufficiency.

**4) *There is a 'sufficiency' evident within 2 Peter, and it is this: deliberate recall of and obedience to the content of the letter is sufficient for the avoidance of false teaching regarding Christ's future coming in power, and of godless living associated with such teaching.***

There are two aspects to this. First of all, recall of and obedience to *this material* is sufficient for that purpose. Peter does not think that he is teaching or commanding these believers about any matters that they are not already aware of: 'I will always remind you of these things even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have' (1:12). Nor is it the case that the letter expresses the sum total of the truth of Christ and the gospel that its recipients know. There is of course a great deal taught elsewhere in the NT that is not made explicit in such a short letter. However for Peter it seems that the content he sets out in 1:3-11 functions as a serviceable summary of what a persevering believer knows and is practising in life.

This perhaps gives some insight into the nature of the distorting of Paul's letters and other Scriptures perpetrated to their own destruction by those whom Peter labels 'ignorant and unstable' (3:16). He has previously said that there are some things in Paul's letters that are hard to understand. On this, Bauckham comments that the reference to 'ignorant' people suggests that these things are hard to understand especially if not interpreted in light of the rest of Pauline and wider apostolic teaching.<sup>6</sup>

The sufficiency of 2 Peter in this regard, then, is found in the fact that it contains an abbreviated but serviceable reminder and summary of what believers who have heard and responded to the apostolic gospel already know, and which itself contains all they need in order to keep them from a certain kind of false teaching and godless living.

Second, *recall of and obedience to the content of this letter is sufficient for the avoidance of such heresy and godlessness*. As Peter anticipates his own death, which will be a key moment in the shift from the apostolic to the post-apostolic era, this letter has something of the character of a 'last will and testament'—the words which a dying man wants to see live on after he is gone. What Peter urges on his audience is not the search for anything new, not the expectation of any previously unknown revelation, nor the reception of any divine empowerment previously withheld. Instead it is a believing and living entirely within the limits of the divine word already delivered and the divine power already given. He regards his

<sup>6</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, p. 331.

letter as sufficient, alongside God's communication through the OT, the apostolic witness, and Christ's command through the apostles, because the giving of the revelation and power which Christians will need for the future is now complete. The root of the great mistake of the false teachers, according to Peter, is not some insensitivity to any brand new thing that God may say or give, but their forgetfulness of what he has already said and done.

Theologically this sufficiency is strongly related to and consequent upon the completeness of God's work both of revelation and of salvation in Christ. (There will be more to say about this shortly when we come to relate this material from 2 Peter to Bavinck's account of the sufficiency of Scripture.) According to 2 Peter there is no excuse for missing the fact that Christ will come again in great power, because even though in his first coming his glory was mostly veiled, it was not entirely hidden. At the Transfiguration, with its background of the earlier OT texts that speak of a cataclysmic messianic coming, the one who will one day come has already been made known and identified. What the church is to do now between the two comings is characterised by Peter primarily as *waiting*; indeed that concept is stated three times in as many verses in chapter 3 (3:12-14). The revelation of the fact of coming judgment is complete; so too is the revelation of the identity of the one who is to come.

Moreover the letter contains an allusion to the completeness of the work of salvation in Christ, since the Lord is said to be at work now not in moving on to some further stage in salvation history but in patiently delaying the parousia so that mercifully more people might repent and find salvation (3:9). Thus theologically within 2 Peter the sufficiency of a number of fundamental teachings guard the believers from heresy and godlessness is all of a piece—the sufficiency of divine power for godly living already given, of the proven trustworthiness of divine promises of Christ's coming in power which have already been given, of the identification of Christ as the one appointed by the Father as eschatological judge, of the Scriptures already authored, and of Peter's own letter, too. The completeness of revelation already given and salvation already achieved is the ground of the sufficiency of the Scriptures which speak of these things and which promise their consummation in Christ at his coming in power.

**5) More simply, the aim of everything that Peter says or implies in 2 Peter about God's word and Scripture is supremely pastoral.**

He is explicit about why he is writing, and the reason is to urge believers to do everything necessary in order to keep themselves from errors about God's actions in the future and from being enticed by those from within the Christian community who encourage godless living. All that he says

from 1:12 through to the end of the letter serves ultimately to drive home to his audience the reason why they need to stick to the message summarised and preached to them in the central section, 1:3-11.

It is crucial to keep this purpose in view when developing any aspect of the doctrine of Scripture. Of course the doctrine has epistemological functions. However the work to which Peter puts his description of various forms of God's word is the urging of Christians to do what is needed to preserve themselves in wholesome thinking and living. It is always legitimate for evangelical theology to articulate its doctrine of Scripture in any particular time and place in a form which explicitly counters the specific nature of the attack it happens to be facing. Yet it will always be detrimental to the health of evangelical theology when this apologetic purpose comes to diminish an articulation of the doctrine of Scripture which makes explicit that the doctrine is needed by believers if they are to be equipped to believe and live rightly in situations where false teaching emerges within the church community.

This is already heading in a doctrinal direction, so let's now move there.

### III. DOCTRINAL REFLECTIONS

I said at the beginning that there will be a focus in this section on Herman Bavinck. Firstly, why Bavinck? Of course in a short paper to refer to just one theologian gives a helpfully limited focus. In addition, I find Bavinck's account of the doctrine of Scripture to be hugely satisfying both theologically and pastorally. One commendation on the dust-jacket of the English translation of his *Reformed Dogmatics* says that the work 'remains after a century the supreme achievement of its kind.' In the following four observations I will note some of the central aspects of Bavinck's account of the sufficiency of Scripture,<sup>7</sup> in relation to some of the themes that we have seen emerging in 2 Peter.

1) Bavinck says that the doctrine of Scripture's attributes in general 'has developed completely as a result of the [Reformation's] struggle with Roman Catholicism and Anabaptism.'<sup>8</sup> Indeed it was within what was said about these attributes, rather than in any aspect of Scripture's inspiration and authority, that the distinctiveness of Reformation theology was to be found over against Roman theology. Bavinck identifies four distinct attributes of Scripture: authority, necessity, sufficiency and perspicuity.

<sup>7</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 1: *Prolegomena*, ed. by John Bolt, trans. by John Vriend (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2003), pp. 481-94.

<sup>8</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 452.

Even the attributes within this short list, he notes, are not all commensurate, since authority 'is given with inspiration itself'<sup>9</sup>, and the remaining three, necessity, sufficiency and perspicuity, 'do not all flow from inspiration in the same sense.'<sup>10</sup> This means that (and these are more my words than Bavinck's) the attributes that really have polemical teeth in the context of the Reformation are the 'big three' of necessity, sufficiency and clarity.

It is crucial to keep this context of historical struggle in view. The attributes of Scripture are properly defined at least as much by what they deny as what they assert. In particular they deny two false notions. First, they deny that there is any divine revelation outside of Scripture which the church requires for faithful belief and practice. Second, they deny that Scripture requires ultimate validation from the work of the Holy Spirit in and through any individual or body of people. It is not often expressed this way, but it is instructive to note that this disagreement at the time of the Reformation is fundamentally a disagreement over the nature of the work of the Holy Spirit—namely, where is the authoritative speech of God through the Holy Spirit to be found? Is it in the Roman Catholic teaching office and ultimately in the Pope? is it in the 'charismatic' individual? or is it in Scripture itself? From this perspective, therefore, it is clear that these attributes flow from a Protestant understanding of the present action of the Holy Spirit and so in this sense are an outworking of good pneumatology. At a popular level especially, too many descriptions of these attributes set 'word' against 'Spirit', as well as against 'tradition', in ways that obscure the real issues.

Very specifically, within the context of the Reformation, the scriptural attributes were asserted as the proper justification for reform: God had spoken and continued to speak through Scripture in such a way that on that basis alone one could know that the church of the time was in need of reformation, and also know what kind of reformation was needed. Moreover through that word God could stir up his faithful people for action. And if the Pope disagreed then so much the worse for him.

This particular context which gave rise to the doctrine of Scripture's attributes fits well with the pastoral context into which Peter interjected his second letter. He was similarly calling believers to remain faithful to a body of teaching and a preached message in order for the church to be steered safely away from false teaching and godlessness that had emerged from within its own ranks. The doctrine of Scripture's attributes is always distorted when it is expounded without a clear eye on this kind of context

<sup>9</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 455.

<sup>10</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 455.

and this kind of practical aim. What then occurs is that the attributes are expounded somewhat in the abstract.

Thus under the heading of its sufficiency, Scripture can be expected to yield a satisfactory answer to every question which one might want to ask of every topic it is thought to touch on. The doctrine of sufficiency gives no warrant for attempting to tie up ends that Scripture leaves loose, for achieving certainty where Scripture only hints or draws a veil, or for looking for systematic clarity on issues that Scripture encompasses but does not expand on. A respect for the pastoral context of the doctrine, and its roots in the explicit aims of texts such as 2 Peter, ought to warn against defining 'sufficiency' in ways that go beyond the claims that Scripture makes for itself and then requiring Scripture to match up to a notion imposed upon it from elsewhere.

Similarly, under the heading of its clarity (if I may be permitted to wander into that neighbouring attribute), it can be expected that every passage of Scripture will easily yield some significant meaning to every individual or every small group, or indeed every preacher, who gives it a little attention. However the doctrine of clarity does not give us warrant for thinking that every passage of Scripture speaks transparently to every reader; much popular application of the doctrine of clarity owes more to the cultural assumptions of educated and rampantly individualistic Westerners than it does to anything that can be found in Scripture or in the teaching of the Reformation. As Peter says of Paul, some things in Scripture *are* hard to understand, and, as we have suggested that he implies, without a knowledge of the apostolic gospel and the OT we may end up distorting them in our ignorance. What *is* sufficiently and clearly given us in Scripture is (at the risk of repetition) a comprehensive account of the actions of God in Christ and the effects of those actions on all who are united to Christ by faith, as given in 2 Peter 1:3-4, along with exhortations for the right living out of such spiritual realities (1:5-11), and urgent reminders to keep these things constantly in view. And all this with no less of an aim, but also no more of an aim, of preserving the church from heresy and godless immorality. Thus we need to keep Scripture's sufficiency carefully within the pastoral bounds which Scripture sets out for it, and, as Bavinck reminds us, the Reformation doctrine is the prime example of that.

2) Of the sufficiency of Scripture, Bavinck says: 'Nor does this attribute imply that Scripture contains all the practices, ceremonies, rules, and regulations that the church needs for its organization but only that it completely contains "the articles of faith" (*articuli fidei*), "the matters neces-



sary to salvation.”<sup>11</sup> This is sometimes known as the ‘material’ sufficiency of Scripture, and it has significant historical pedigree. Augustine wrote: ‘among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters that concern faith and the manner and life – to wit, hope and love’.<sup>12</sup> Similar, from the sixteenth century, is the First Helvetic Confession: ‘Biblical Scripture [...] alone deals with everything that serves the true knowledge, honour and love of God, as well as true piety and the making of a godly, honest and blessed life.’ The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 goes a step further by adding an additional topic on which Scripture is declared to speak sufficiently: ‘the reformation and government of churches’.

The fuller statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith sets out with greater clarity the way in which this latter topic can be said to be related to the sufficiency of Scripture:

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: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge [...] that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.<sup>13</sup>

The most common historical understanding, put simply, is that Scripture is the total and sufficient rule of faith and morals. Other topics, such as church government and worship, are ruled sufficiently by the Word, but not entirely legislated by the Word, such that they come within the orbit of biblical sufficiency in a qualified sense.

‘A sufficient rule of faith and morals’ is an excellent summary of what 2 Peter claims itself to be. Indeed, the NT epistles which do speak more directly on questions of church government and organisation, in particular the Pastoral Epistles, still retain within that a focus on those two topics, with their emphasis on the necessary qualifications of faith and morality for those to be appointed as elders and deacons. In fact the Pastorals have more to say about elders’ and deacons’ personal morality and life-style in a range of areas than they do about their faith—something which is not

<sup>11</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 488.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.9, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2, ed. by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

<sup>13</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.6.

always given appropriate weight in the discernment and appointment of church leaders and officers.

3) Bavinck locates the roots of the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture in a very early move in the life of the church. As the church became further removed from the time of the apostles, he says, 'The relative independence of tradition alongside Scripture also disappeared. The streams of Scripture and tradition flowed into a single channel. And soon after the death of the apostles and their contemporaries, it became impossible to prove a thing to be of apostolic origin except by an appeal to the apostolic writings.'<sup>14</sup> This issue was at the heart of the Reformation's dispute with Rome. Like Rome, the Reformation made a distinction between an unwritten and a written word, but whereas Rome 'assumes their existence side by side [...] the Reformation views this distinction as referring to the same word of God that first existed for a time in unwritten form and was subsequently recorded.'<sup>15</sup> The Council of Trent set its face firmly against this, stating that 'saving truths and rules of conduct'<sup>16</sup> are 'contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions.'<sup>17</sup>

Bavinck's image of the stream of 'tradition' flowing into a single channel with Scripture, with the unwritten being set down and taken up into the written, has strong links, I suggest, with the way in which Peter's own writing in 2 Peter both makes reference to other texts as Scripture and also comes to function as Scripture. This is not made explicit in the letter, of course, and there is no need to stumble into the intentional fallacy of imagining that we can infer anything about the apostle's awareness of the status of his own writing. However I am arguing here that there is within 2 Peter some indication of the way in which the teaching of an apostle merged into and became part of the stream of Scripture.

Something further about tradition can be said here. Bavinck defends the continuation of 'a good, true, and glorious tradition.'<sup>18</sup> He defines it in this way:

To the mind of the Reformation, Scripture was an organic<sup>19</sup> principle from which the entire tradition, living on in preaching, confession, liturgy, worship, theology, devotional literature, etc., arises and is nurtured. It is a pure

<sup>14</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 485.

<sup>15</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 488.

<sup>16</sup> Council of Trent, Session 4, First Decree.

<sup>17</sup> Council of Trent, Session 4, First Decree.

<sup>18</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 494.

<sup>19</sup> 'Organic' is one of Bavinck's favourite terms to describe the content and character of good doctrines of Scripture and especially of inspiration.

spring of living water from which all the currents and channels of religious life are fed and maintained. Such tradition is grounded in Scripture itself.<sup>20</sup>

He describes the function of such tradition in these terms: 'It is the method by which the Holy Spirit causes the truth of Scripture to pass into the consciousness and life of the church.'<sup>21</sup> Its scriptural basis is found in the promise in John chapter 16 that the Holy Spirit would guide the church into the truth (John 16:12-15). In 2 Peter I would suggest that we have seen another biblical seed of this understanding of tradition. It is in Peter's desire at the end of his life to leave a legacy that consists entirely of an exhortation to believers to keep recalling the truth that has already been delivered and in which they are already established, and to continue to live by the divine power already bestowed.

4) A feature of Bavinck's doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is the solid basis he gives for it in the completeness of God's work in Christ, with regard to both revelation and salvation. Of revelation both in Christ and in Scripture, he says:

The Holy Spirit no longer reveals any new doctrines but takes everything from Christ (John 16:14). In Christ God's revelation has been completed. In the same way the message of salvation is completely contained in Scripture. It constitutes a single whole; it itself conveys the impression of an organism that has reached its full growth. It ends where it begins. It is a circle that returns into itself. It begins with the creation of heaven and earth and ends with the re-creation of heaven and earth.<sup>22</sup>

Bavinck relates this completeness of revelation in Christ and consequently in Scripture quite directly to the completeness of the work of salvation. The section quoted above continues:

The canon of the OT and NT was not closed until all new initiatives of redemptive history were present. In this dispensation the Holy Spirit has no other task than to apply the work of Christ and similarly to explain the word of Christ. *To neither does he add anything new.* The work of Christ does not need to be supplemented by the good works of believers, and the word of Christ does not need to be supplemented by the tradition of the church.<sup>23</sup>

I suspect that at this point a noteworthy contrast can be drawn between Bavinck and his contemporary B. B. Warfield. (In fact they were very con-

<sup>20</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 493.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 494.

<sup>22</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 491.

<sup>23</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, pp. 491-92 (*italics added*).

temporary: the American was three years older than the Dutchman, and they died within five months of each other in 1921.) Bavinck's doctrine places a much stronger explicit emphasis on its derivation from christology and pneumatology than Warfield tends to in his writings. For example, Bavinck also draws an analogy between the human authorship of Scripture and the human nature of Christ.<sup>24</sup> Indeed the title of a short study by Richard Gaffin of Bavinck on Scripture, alongside Kuyper, characterises his doctrine as 'God's Word *in servant form*'.<sup>25</sup>

One can only speculate on the extent to which the history of the doctrine of Scripture and controversies surrounding it in the English-speaking Reformed world in the twentieth century would have been different if Bavinck's doctrine had been translated sooner and proved to rank in influence alongside Warfield's.

However that may be, a reading of 2 Peter at least suggests that the emphases of Bavinck's doctrine are more obviously shaped by the nature of the NT's own view of itself at this key point than the emphases that emerge in Warfield's writings. For we have seen that the letter contains significant material to inform and shape a doctrine of Scripture, and especially scriptural sufficiency, beyond the well-known text on OT prophets being carried along by the Holy Spirit. Peter is provoked to present this material by the 'false words' and godless living of some who deny the future coming of Christ as judge. All that he says of Scripture serves to call his letter's recipients back to a solid expectation of the coming again in glory of the one whom they already know, and in whose truth they are already established.

<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, p. 435.

<sup>25</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *God's Word in Servant-Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on the Doctrine of Scripture* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic Press, 2008).