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The Apostolic Fathers on the Sufficiency of Scripture for Evangelization: A Model for the Modern Evangelical Church in America

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Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Most modern American churches that stand within the Evangelical tradition hold to a biblically orthodox theology that maintains the doctrines of Scripture's inspiration, inerrancy, and authority. However, the doctrine of Scripture's sufficiency, especially as it pertains to evangelism, has been practically abandoned, despite its being upheld on paper. The phenomenon has been noticed by theologians such as Akin who comments, "most evangelical Christians know to affirm the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture at least in theory. But it is an open question as to whether the church and its members believe the doctrine in practice."¹ This practical abandonment has come about due to a sincere desire to reach a culture that has become largely estranged from its Christian heritage. Therefore, it has been argued that appealing to the Scripture is no longer effective at reaching an audience that is, at best, ignorant of the Bible and, at worst, hostile to it.

However, the early church preached to a culture that was entirely pagan, both ignorant of the Scripture and hostile to it. As Schaff attests regarding the pagan literature of this early period, "we find little more than ignorant, careless and hostile allusions to Christianity as a new form of superstition which then began to attract the attention of the Roman government."² Therefore, it stands to reason that if they sought to fulfill the Great Commission while holding to a theology that put the sufficiency of Scripture into practice then the same practical theology should serve the modern church in its current time and place. That said, most people in the modern American evangelical churches know very little about the early church's faith and practice. In short, the modern church in America is limited by its ignorance.

¹ Daniel L. Akin, *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 146.

² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Ante-Nicene Christianity A.D. 100-325*, vol. 2 (1858; repr., Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 86.

Given the modern Evangelical ignorance regarding the position of the Apostolic Father's on Scripture's sufficiency, it was necessary to research what the Apostolic Fathers, defined as those Christian leaders who lived and taught in the first two centuries of the church age, believed regarding the sufficiency of Scripture for the evangelization of the lost. The research revealed that the teaching and practice of the Apostolic Fathers demonstrated a conviction in the sufficiency of Scripture for evangelization, which has been defined as the entire process of proclaiming the gospel, winning converts to the faith, and making fully committed disciples of those converts. Nonetheless, this study is in no way exhaustive. Rather, it is only intended as an overview of the topic.

With that in mind, writings of an allegorical nature or writings that lacked an agreed upon author were not considered. The longer Greek versions of Ignatius' writings were also excluded. In addition, the writings of Clement of Rome and Polycarp were also not consulted due to their limited nature. Therefore, the primary focus of the research was the accepted writings of Ignatius, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus. After determining their general view on the Scripture's sufficiency, especially as it pertained to evangelization, the study investigated whether they applied that view, in a practical way, to their evangelization efforts. A specific question that was asked is, "did the Apostolic Fathers think that the Scripture was less effective at achieving God's purpose for the unbelieving as it was for the believing?"

The simple answer to that question is that they did not make any distinction between believer and unbeliever as they proclaimed and taught God's word. This is significant because they lived in a culture that was entirely pagan, and as a point of fact, they conquered it with the word of God. Therefore, they have provided an example for the modern church to hold to Scripture's sufficiency for evangelization in its own context. In learning how the Apostolic

Father's viewed the Scripture, contemporary Evangelicals may conclude, not that they have relied too heavily on Scripture to achieve God's purpose, but too little.

On the Doctrine of the Sufficiency of Scripture

The reason that Scripture's sufficiency may be neglected as a doctrine is that it is a very humble doctrine. By its very nature, it is always understated. Like many systematic theologies, Oden sums it up in a sentence saying, "the Bible...is the deposit of the sufficient and adequate witness to God's self-disclosure."³ In the modern world, things described as "adequate" and "sufficient" can easily come to be thought of as antiquated. However, nothing could be further from the truth. When the word of God is called "sufficient," it is meant that, among other things, the Bible contains everything necessary to accomplish God's redemptive purpose in the here and now.

It is sufficient in the tangible sense of a jury summons or an arrest warrant. It would be unthinkable to add something to either of those documents because they are sufficient to accomplish the purpose of the one who wrote and sent them. Scripture is the only thing necessary to accomplish God's purpose, and this is the clear testimony of the Scripture itself. Of His word, the Lord has said, "it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11b, ESV).⁴ Further, the Scripture tells exactly what the purpose is that it is sufficient to accomplish.

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, God plainly declares that His word is not only inspired but "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." The word rightly translated as

³ Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 178.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version*.

“profitable” in this verse comes from the Greek verb *ophello*, which means “to heap up” in the sense of accumulating.⁵ This reiterates the idea expressed in Isaiah 55:11; God’s word will give Him a return. It is always fruitful, bringing in the harvest and piling it up to the satisfaction and glory of the Lord who sent it forth.

However, in this specific context, the focus is on the sufficiency of God’s word to teach, reprove or convict, correct, and train the man of God. It is worth note that the word translated “man” is *anthropos*, which is the general designation for man as a species.⁶ Therefore, this would apply to any person belonging to God, and God’s word does all these things to make the one who belongs to God “complete, equipped for every good work.” By “complete,” it is meant that the man of God is whole, formed in such a manner that he is well proportioned and perfectly balanced.⁷ Therefore, he is fully equipped for every good work.

Taken together, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is asserting that the word of God is sufficient to produce a fully formed and fully equipped follower of Jesus, which is the very mission of the church (Matt 28:19). The word of God is the church’s practical means for the successful completion of its God-given mission. The implication is that the church cannot complete its mission apart from the word of God. Paul fully recognizes this as he declares, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). How can anyone believe God’s word and be shaped by it without hearing it proclaimed (Rom 10:14-15)? Schaeffer once noted

⁵ James Strong, *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Greek Dictionary of the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 53.

⁶ Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and G. W. Bromiley eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 364.

⁷ Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 2, trans. by James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 18.

that the problem of the church was that it did not practice the inerrancy of Scripture⁸, and that is the doctrine of sufficiency in short: inerrancy in practice.

On the Apostolic Father's View of Sufficiency

Ignatius of Antioch

The span of Bishop Ignatius' life was from approximately A.D. 30 to 107.⁹ Tradition holds that both he and Polycarp were pupils of the Apostle John.¹⁰ Therefore, his accepted writings are some of the earliest in church history outside of the Scripture itself. Ignatius provides a voice from the time when the gospel of the Lord first went forth to shine in the darkness and that darkness was very black indeed. The church saw rapid expansion during his lifetime, but it also saw the beginning of great persecution, persecution that brought about Ignatius' martyrdom under the emperor Trajan.¹¹

Due to the fact that Ignatius lived when the New Testament canon was still being written and suffered martyrdom before the canon was fully affirmed by the entire church, his view on Scripture's sufficiency is of especial interest. However, one certainly should not look for a specific declaration on sufficiency within his writings, and indeed, such a declaration is not to be found. Nonetheless, one may certainly deduce his view on the topic from what he did write. For Ignatius, the sufficiency of Scripture was so self-evident as to need no formal declaration.

That being said, Ignatius did not view the Scripture in terms of something to be read but in terms of something to be heard and lived out. He would have never considered it to be

⁸ Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 2, *A Christian View of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 329.

⁹ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

something that was simply written on a page, but something that lived in the heart and mouth of every Christian by the power of the Holy Spirit. He desired most of all to “not only be called a Christian but to be found to be [one],”¹² and told Christians to be “adorned in all respects with the commandments of Jesus Christ.”¹³ As to how Ignatius expected Christians to know what the commandments of Christ were, he said that “he who possesses the word of Jesus is truly able to hear even His very silence, that he may act as he speaks.”¹⁴

Ignatius further encouraged Christians to “be established in the doctrines of the Lord and the apostles, that so in all things, whatsoever ye do, may prosper both in the flesh and spirit.”¹⁵ Although Ignatius did not directly refer to the “doctrines of the Lord and apostles” as Scripture, he demonstrated that he held them on the same level as the Old Testament when he said, “I flee to the Gospel as to the flesh of the Jesus, and to the apostles as to the presbytery of the Church. And let us also love the prophets, because they too have proclaimed the Gospel.”¹⁶ In a separate letter, Ignatius would again admonish the church to “give heed to the prophets, and above all, the Gospel, in which the passion [of Christ] has been revealed to us, and the resurrection has been fully proved.”¹⁷ Taken together, it seems clear that Ignatius is referring to the whole of Scripture that would become the unified Bible when he speaks of the Gospels, Apostles, and Prophets. Further, in saying that Christ is revealed and the resurrection fully proved in the Gospel, Ignatius lays the foundation for the doctrine of sufficiency.

¹² Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr lived from A.D. 110 to 165. It is important to note that he was well educated, versed in the Greek classics, and a philosopher in his own right.¹⁸ He was a man who could, and often did, meet the wise of his own age on their own ground. He could also be considered a true Christian theologian, but he was no armchair theologian. He was on the front line fighting to “hold back those who are stumbling to slaughter” (Prov 24:11b). Therefore, his views on Scripture’s sufficiency are also worth hearing.

Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho, who was Jewish, might be summed up with Justin’s declaration that “Christ is King, and Priest, and God, and Lord...and a Son born, and first made subject to suffering, then returning to heaven, and again coming with glory, and He is preached as having the everlasting kingdom: so I prove from all the Scriptures.”¹⁹ This alone shows that Justin believed the Scripture sufficient to proclaim and “prove” Christ. However, since Trypho was familiar, at the very least, with the Old Testament, more is needed to show the fulness of Justin’s view on sufficiency. Happily, he left a great deal more.

In his address to the Greeks, Justin doesn’t imagine that anyone could get any real revelation of God apart from the Scripture. He goes so far as to argue that Plato took many of his notions from the ancient Jewish Scripture.²⁰ He further calls the Greek gods devils in accordance with the proclamation of Scripture.²¹ The Scripture truly becomes the sword in Justin’s hand to wage war against the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of the present darkness (Eph 6:12) of his own time and place. It was the hammer in his hand to smash the rock of Greek culture to

¹⁸ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 159.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 286.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

pieces (Jer 23:29). He found the Scripture alone to be sufficient to cast down every lofty argument that raised itself against the knowledge of God (2 Cor 10:5).

That being said, Justin did by no means only use the Scripture to argue with his opponents. He could rightly be called the church's first apologist in the truest sense. He did appeal to the common reason available to all people in order to aid them in coming to faith, but he always started with the clear proclamation of Scripture and worked from there, recognizing that it was the Scripture that sufficiently reveals truth and calls on every person to believe and live. For Justin, the Scripture, from the very first word of Genesis, revealed and proclaimed Christ. Whenever he used an argument from nature or philosophy, it was in defense of the Scripture's proclamation. The Scripture was always the ground he stood upon whether he defended that ground or launched an attack from it.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus fought for Christ in the latter half of the second century A.D., being born around A.D. 120 and passing on to glory around A.D. 202.²² It is well known that Irenaeus was the student of Polycarp and that he was a lion of the Faith. During his lifetime, he had to contend, not only against the pagans, but against the wayward church. As Justin could be called the church's first true apologist, Irenaeus could be called its first true theologian. His importance can not be understated as he was the first to "make full use of the apostolic writings of Scripture."²³ Having learned, not only from Scripture, but from Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and the earlier writings of Ignatius, one may say that Irenaeus represented the culmination and fullness of the Apostolic Fathers' teaching.

²² Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 309.

²³ John Behr, *On the Apostolic Preaching: St Irenaeus of Lyons* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 14.

Unlike some of the writers who preceded him, Irenaeus has plainly and systematically stated his views on Scripture. Irenaeus begins his broadside against the heretics of his day with words “Inasmuch as certain men have set truth aside.”²⁴ At the outset, Irenaeus will contend that all error is the result of abandoning God’s word, which is truth (John 17:17) and “the good word of revelation.”²⁵ He specifically condemns the heretics of gathering “their views from other sources than the Scriptures,” and in so doing, weaving “ropes of sand.”²⁶ Therefore, Irenaeus makes it clear that the Scripture, which include the writings of the prophets and apostles, is the only sufficient source of truth and revelation.

That said, Irenaeus will also condemn them for doing violence to the Scripture because, rather than making philosophy submit to Scripture as Justin did, they made the Scripture to submit to their philosophy.²⁷ For Irenaeus, the plain language of Scripture was the very word of God. There could be no question as to whether God did or did not say (Gen 3:1). He appealed to the Scripture to end every argument. As with Justin, the Scripture was the sword and hammer in his hand. Regarding the deficiencies of the heretics understanding of God, Irenaeus said, “if they had known the Scriptures, and been taught by the truth, they would have known, beyond doubt, that God is not as men are.”²⁸ Therefore, he again shows the sufficiency of the Scripture in correcting error.

Another argument for Irenaeus’ belief in Scripture’s sufficiency comes from his trust in its perspicuity, which was made evident when he said, “the entire Scriptures, the prophets, and the Gospels, can be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all, although all do

²⁴ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 315.

²⁵ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 315.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 374.

not believe them.”²⁹ From this, it may be understood that Irenaeus believed that the Scripture could be understood by both believer and unbeliever alike. Therefore, its proclamations were sufficient to bring all “to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). Further, Irenaeus declares that the “Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.”³⁰ By way of this argument, the Scripture must also be sufficient to Irenaeus, or they would not be perfect.

Irenaeus further contended that nothing could really be definitively known of God that wasn’t revealed by the Scripture.³¹ In this, he confirmed the Scripture as the only sufficient source to obtain knowledge pertaining to God. He further declared that the “knowledge of salvation” itself was handed down in the Scriptures, and that if any rejected the knowledge written in the Gospels, they rejected Christ Himself.³² Additionally, his entire third and fourth section of *Against Heresies* are arguments to show that the entirety of Scripture sufficiently reveals and proclaims Christ in all His glory to any who would hear and live. It would have been unthinkable for Irenaeus to preach Christ from anywhere but the Scripture because that was where Christ could be found.

Regarding the correction of the saints, if Irenaeus’ use of Scripture wasn’t enough to prove his belief that it was sufficient to correct God’s people, he also plainly states that it is.³³ He further finds that Scripture is sufficient to discern between those who belong to God and those who belong to the devil.³⁴ For Irenaeus, Scripture was truly able to “discern the thoughts and

²⁹ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 398.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 399.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 400.

³² *Ibid.*, 414.

³³ *Ibid.*, 499.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 524.

intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). It was the Holy Spirit’s chosen instrument to convict men of their need to repent, whether in Christ or out of Christ.

Of especial note to those in modern times, Irenaeus also took great pains in his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* to show that the Apostles preached Christ from the Old Testament. Therefore, he demonstrated that the whole of Scripture was wholly sufficient to proclaim Christ. As far as Irenaeus was concerned, it could be fairly said that to deny Christ in the Old Testament was tantamount to denying the Holy Spirit, who leads the church into all truth (John 16:13). Bahr best summarizes Irenaeus’ admonition concerning the Scripture as “we must hold firm to the preaching of truth, which the prophets announced, which Christ confirmed, and which the apostles have delivered.”³⁵ Taken together, the corpus of Irenaeus’ teaching was nothing short of a concrete demonstration of the sufficiency of Scripture.

Summation and Conclusion

Taken together, did the Apostolic Fathers’ words or actions ever indicate that they felt that the word of God was somehow less effective for the unbelieving than it was for the believing? The answer to this question seems to be a resounding no. Some may be inclined to argue that Ignatius, given that the bulk of his writings were directed to believers, may have felt the Scripture less effective in calling the unbelieving to faith. However, of those who persist in unbelief, he wrote, “these persons neither have the prophets persuaded, nor the law of Moses, nor the Gospel even to this day.”³⁶ This is in perfect keeping with what the affirmation the Lord gives us of Scripture’s sufficiency in Luke 16:31, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

³⁵ John Behr, *On the Apostolic Preaching: St Irenaeus of Lyons* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 23.

³⁶ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 88.

That said, when the Apostolic Fathers are taken together, they provide a very clear demonstration of their belief in Scripture's sufficiency to accomplish the ever present mission of the church, which is to call people from every nation to repent and follow Christ the Lord in earnest. They believed in the sufficient power of God's word to accomplish the task He sent it for. They would have never thought of the Scripture as simply ink on parchment but would have certainly agreed with Stott in saying it was "a living word to living people from a living God."³⁷ They demonstrated that the Scripture was sufficient in both calling the lost to faith and fully forming them in that faith. Further, it is highly dubious as to whether the Apostolic Fathers would have ever described the Scripture's sufficiency in the drab term of "adequate." Rather, they would have been more likely to call it sufficient because it was the one thing necessary and most efficient for accomplishing the task that the Lord had assigned to them.

Implications for the Modern Evangelical Church

Evangelicals in America are unquestionably in the thick of a real and increasingly uphill battle for the heart and soul of a nation that has largely abandoned its foundation. However, battles are often lost when the lessons of past battles are forgotten. Further, the Scripture will not allow the present generation to assert that they face an entirely new problem simply because they are living at the most advanced point on the calendar, for "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1:9). When Martin Lloyd-Jones was confronted with the same arguments for abandoning the doctrine of sufficiency that have been presented to the current generation, he answered them by simply saying "God has not changed, and man has not changed."³⁸

³⁷ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 100.

³⁸ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *On Preaching and Preachers*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 51.

The Apostolic Fathers marshaled the church to win the battle of their time. The modern church is the very evidence of their victory, and they won that victory with the recognition that it is Scripture “as ‘special revelation’ that most clearly confronts our spiritually rebellious race with the reality and authority of God.”³⁹ The Bible is sufficient precisely because “words of ultimate authority are found in only one place, the Holy Scriptures.”⁴⁰ This is the reality that the Apostolic Fathers insisted upon. Recognizing this, Thomas Oden, one of the foremost contemporary students of the Apostolic Fathers, remarked that the “apostolic tradition...calls us...to risk letting the Word be sharply heard by the congregation.”⁴¹ If the American church of today desires to imitate the Apostolic Fathers in their victory, it is only reasonable that they should imitate them in their method, standing on the sufficiency of Scripture to accomplish God’s good purpose in this fallen world.

³⁹ Walter A. Elwell, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 297.

⁴⁰ J. Frame, “The Bible’s Sufficiency,” in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, eds. M. Ward, J. Parks, B. Ellis, & T. Hains (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), Logos eBook.

⁴¹ Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983), 136.

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