1.1 The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.\(^1\) Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men without excuse; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and His will which is necessary unto salvation.\(^2\) Therefore it pleased the Lord at various times and in diverse manners to reveal Himself, and to declare His will unto His church;\(^3\) and afterward for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which makes the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of God’s revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.\(^4\)

\(^1\) 2 Tim. 3:15-17; Isa. 8:20; Lk. 16:29,31; Eph. 2:20
\(^2\) Rom. 1:19-21; 2:14-15; Psa. 19
\(^3\) Heb. 1:1-2
\(^4\) Prov. 22:19-21; Rom. 15:4; 2 Pet. 1:19-20

**Lesson Layout:**

I. Revelation Defined

II. Two Kinds of Revelation
   A. General Revelation
   B. Special Revelation

III. Holy Scripture
   A. Purpose
   B. Necessity

IV. Sola Scriptura
   A. What It Does Not Mean
   B. What It Does Mean
   C. Contrasting Views: Reformed vs. Roman Catholic

Summary

Application

**Baptist Catechism Parallel:** Questions 1-6
INTRODUCTION
This first paragraph of the chapter and of the Confession constitutes one of the most important teachings for the Christian faith. With this the foundation is being laid; for we are in essence answering the questions, *How may we come to know God; and in coming to know God, how may we live in a manner pleasing to Him?*. From the title given to this paragraph you can tell that we’re going from a general topic to a more particular topic. Further, this paragraph introduces us to an extremely important and foundational doctrine within the Evangelical faith – *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). We read it in the first sentence: “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.” This cornerstone doctrine of the whole of Bible doctrine is expounded upon throughout the rest of the chapter, as it defines what books are included in the corpus of the Bible, as well as the authority, sufficiency and proper interpretation of the Bible. In fact, a summary title of the entire chapter could simply be “Sola Scriptura”.

Now, in my opinion, this statement on *sola Scriptura* is better suited at the end of the paragraph, and for that reason I will reserve the discussion of it until the end of this study. The reason for treating this last, simply put, is that the rest of the paragraph actually leads into it, theologically speaking, rather than flows from it. If this is unclear now, it should become exceptionally clear as we progress through the lesson.

I. REVELATION DEFINED
Revelation (Gr. αποκαλυψις) means laying bear; disclosing or revealing; manifesting. In regards to God, revelation refers to God’s self-disclosure (the knowledge of Him and His will). This is seen in the Confession by such phrases as “manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God” and “knowledge of God and His will.” However, as we will see, there are two kinds of revelation, and only one of them is sufficient to communicate that knowledge and will of God necessary for salvation.
II. TWO KINDS OF REVELATION

A. General Revelation
This form of revelation is expressed in the Confession with the following words:

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men without excuse; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and His will which is necessary unto salvation.

This revelation is general, both in its scope (those to whom it impacts; all of mankind) and in its content (the knowledge/truth it communicates of God and His will).

Berkhof: “General revelation is rooted in creation and in the general relations of God to man, is addressed to man considered simply as the creature and image-bearer of God, and aims at the realization of the end for which man was created and which can be attained only where man knows God and enjoys communion with Him.”

The “light of nature” refers to the natural knowledge that man has of God based on their being created in God’s image – the works of the Law written on their hearts, with their consciences bearing witness (Rom. 2:14-15; cf. Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; Q. 3 of the Baptist Catechism).

The “works of creation and providence” obviously refers to the rest of the created order – the universe and all that’s in it – as well as God’s continual care and governance of creation (Ps. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:18-23). Notice that these passages do not mention any redemptive effects with regard to general revelation.

The Glory of God Manifested in Creation (cf. Ps. 104)

**Goodness of God:** e.g. “He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Mt. 5:45; cf. Acts 17:28).

**Wisdom of God:** e.g. “Then God said, ‘Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them’; and it was so” (Gen. 1:11; cf. Prov. 3:19-20).

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**Power of God:** e.g. “Behold now, Behemoth, which I made as well as you; he eats grass like an ox. Behold now, his strength in his loins and his power in the muscles of his belly” (Job 40:15-16; cf. Heb. 1:3).

Though man may gain some knowledge of God by means of this revelation, it is not sufficient for salvation. General revelation confronts us with God’s glory and our creatureliness, and while we may sense some conviction of our fallenness, the revelation itself does not reveal that redemptive plan of God in and through Jesus Christ. This revelation is enough to leave mankind without excuse for their sin and rebellion against God. What knowledge is made accessible by general revelation is either rejected or twisted by man, for sin and the Fall has so altered man’s receptivity of truth (it is obscured), that they would rather live a lie than glorify God as God. Thus, we are also told in Scripture that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18).

**Bottom Line:** *Voiceless testimony of creation to God’s glory and man’s creatureliness; insufficient to give the knowledge of God and His will that is necessary for salvation*

This insufficiency of general revelation to save fallen mankind leads us to the second kind of revelation that is sufficient to lead sinners to repentance and faith unto salvation.

**B. Special Revelation**

This form of revelation is expressed in the Confession by the following words:

> Therefore it pleased the Lord at various times and in diverse manners to reveal Himself, and to declare His will unto His church.

This truth is most succinctly expressed in Hebrews 1:1-2b: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son....” This speaks generally of the means by which God disclosed Himself and His will unto His people. It also shows the progressive nature of revelation; that is, God revealed more and more about Himself and His redemptive plan as time progressed. In other words, He didn’t drop the completed Bible from heaven.

Now, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the fullest and ultimate revelation of the Father (e.g. Jn. 1:14-18; 2 Cor. 4:4-6; Heb. 1:3). That being so, we might wonder, Why then the apostles and
the New Testament? There are at least two, though closely related, answers to this. First, what we know about Jesus is contained in the New Testament. Therefore, if we didn’t have the New Testament, we wouldn’t know much about Jesus. Second, the New Testament was likely implied in the phrase, “He...has spoken to us in His Son” (see Jn. 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:12-15; Acts 1:1-8; Eph. 2:19-22).

Berkhof: “Special revelation...is rooted in the redemptive work of God, is addressed to man as a sinner and adapted to the moral and spiritual needs of fallen man, and aims at leading the sinner back to God through the specific knowledge of God’s redemptive love revealed in Christ Jesus. It is not like general revelation a light that lighteth every man, but a light that illumines the pathway of those who are made receptive for the truth by the special operation of the Holy Spirit.”

Let us look again at Psalm 19, where we have general (vv. 1-6) and special (vv. 7-14) revelation side-by-side. Note that the general name of God (El) is used in the context of general revelation, a name which can also refer to the false gods of pagans. On the other hand, God’s covenant name (Yahweh), which is unique to Him and His covenant people, is used in the context of special revelation (the word of God). You will remember that there are no redemptive benefits listed for general revelation. Now notice that there are redemptive benefits listed in regards to special revelation.

Berkhof: “The Bible is par excellence the book of special revelation, a revelation in which words and facts go hand in hand, the former interpreting the latter, and the latter giving concrete embodiment to the former.”

By “facts” Berkhof means nature and history. A good example of this “word and facts” revelation would be the exodus of the Israelites from bondage to Egypt. This is a historical event that involved God interpreting the facts, especially in regard to the Passover sacrifice (Ex. 12), which find its fulfillment in Jesus Christ (e.g. Jn. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7).

**Bottom Line:** Testimony in word and fact, the content of which is redemptive in nature

In light of what we have just learned about special revelation, let us now turn to and take a closer look at the par excellence of special revelation – the Bible.

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4 Ibid., 31.
III. HOLY SCRIPTURE
The Holy Scriptures are special/redemptive revelation committed “unto writing” (i.e. the word of God written). The Confession expresses both the purpose of special revelation being committed unto writing and the now necessity of the written word (Scripture).

...and afterward for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which makes the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of God’s revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.

A. Purpose
We already saw that special/redemptive revelation was revealed progressively, over time, such as through the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles (Heb. 1:1-2). Yet, if this revelation was to have a farther reach, both in time (i.e. throughout the centuries) and space (i.e. geographically), God had to preserve His word; it needed to be written. Enter in the Holy Scriptures.

“Better preserving and propagating of the truth;” Ex. 34:27-28; 2 Ki. 22:8-13; Jer. 30:2-3; Lk. 1:1-4; Col. 4:16; 2 Thess. 2:15; Rev. 21:5

“More sure establishment and comfort of the church against corruption;” Lk. 24:44-47; 1 Cor. 10:11-13; 15:1-4; 2 Tim. 2:15; 3:15-17; Jude v. 3

B. Necessity
In order for men and women to be saved, they must be exposed to or come into contact with redemptive revelation. Since there are no more apostles and prophets today (Eph. 2:20), no more giving of special/redemptive revelation, the Holy Scriptures are necessary for the accomplishment of God’s purposes in the saving of mankind (e.g. 2 Tim. 3:15-4:5).

The Holy Spirit: I want to at least briefly mention here that it is the word of God – the Scriptures (preached or read) – that the Holy Spirit sovereignly and mightily works through to bring about conviction of sin, regeneration, repentance and faith, and sanctification (e.g. Acts 10:34-48; 1 Thess. 1:4-5; 2 Thess. 2:13-14).

Having given a consideration of the purpose and necessity of Holy Scripture, let us now turn to consider the foundational doctrine of sola Scriptura.
IV. SOLA SCRIPTURA

The doctrine of sola Scriptura (Scripture alone) is expressed as follows: “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.” (It is worth noting that this statement is neither found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, nor the Savoy Declaration.) Now, before getting into the meaning of this fundamental doctrine, let us first look at what it does not mean, so as to avoid any confusion.

A. What It Does Not Mean

The following is a brief list expressing what sola Scriptura does not mean, followed by affirmations (i.e. corrections). The purpose of this is to help prevent any misconceptions of the doctrine. Sola Scriptura does not mean:

1. The Bible contains sufficient knowledge of and instruction for all things (e.g. Mathematics; Science; Architecture)
   • We affirm that Scripture is only sufficient in the matters of saving knowledge, faith, and obedience; for that was and remains its Divine purpose (see section B below).

2. That Christians are to study the Bible in isolation from the community of the church, with no other authorities except the word of God
   • We affirm that God primarily works in community (e.g. Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:23-25), and therefore theology is to be done in the community of the church (e.g. historic creeds; commentaries; elders), which are lesser and fallible authorities; therefore all things are subject to correction by the word of God, which alone is infallible.

3. That all the acts and teachings of Jesus and the apostles are contained in the Scriptures
   • We affirm that the Bible itself teaches that not every act and every single word of Jesus and the Apostles found their way into Scripture (e.g. Jn. 20:30), but that what has been enscripturated is sufficient for achieving God’s purposes (e.g. Jn. 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16-17), and that what was taught orally was not substantially different, and especially not contradictory, to what has been enscripturated (e.g. 2 Thess. 2:13-15; 3:6).

4. That there was never a time when the church followed oral teaching and instruction.
   • We affirm that prior to enscripturation the church believed and followed the oral teaching and instruction of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles; however, even their teaching was rooted in the revelation of God that had already been enscripturated, and that written revelation served as the ultimate or final authority (the standard/rule) in the matter (e.g. Deut. 13:1-5; Isa. 8:20; Jn. 5:39; Acts 17:11; cf. Lk. 16:27-31).
While there are likely more ways in which sola Scriptura is misunderstood, these are just a few that tend to be brought up a lot.

**B. What It Does Mean**

**Rule**
A rule is a standard, a guide, a thing by which something is measured. If something does not align with or match up to a rule, then it is deemed flawed, in error, corrupt. When it comes to the church, the rule that God has established for His people is the Holy Scriptures. The Confession describes this rule in three ways: only sufficient, only certain, and only infallible. This answers the question, What *kind* of rule is the Holy Scripture? Further, the Confession describes what the Holy Scripture is a rule unto: saving knowledge, faith, and obedience. This answers the question, What is the *purpose* of the Holy Scripture? We will look at both of these in turn.

**Kind:**

**Only Sufficient:** The sufficiency of Scripture goes beyond the concept of base adequacy – enough to get by – and communicates that the Scriptures abundantly supply to the church that which is required of it. The Scriptures are not in need of a second rule, such as Roman Catholic Tradition, for the church to know the gospel, grow in the knowledge of God, and live in a manner pleasing to Him. All that we need to know for salvation, faith, and life is found in the Holy Scriptures (e.g. 2 Tim. 3:15-17)

**Only Certain:** The certainty of Scripture is essentially the equivalent of our contemporary term “inerrant”. It means that the Scriptures are factual, without error, truthful in all its parts. This is so because the Author of Scripture – God – is truth, and therefore cannot lie (e.g. Jn. 17:17; Jm. 1:17-18; 1 Jn. 1:5).

**Only Infallible:** The infallibility of Scripture means that, being without error, it is likewise trustworthy to lead us into all truth. Those who genuinely seek to build their beliefs and practices upon the Scriptures may do so with confidence that they stand upon a firm foundation (e.g. Mt. 7:24-27; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Pet. 3:14-16).

In brief, the “only” modifying all three of these descriptions means that Scripture alone possesses these qualities; there is nothing else like it. There is no other rule/standard like the Scriptures, either in kind or in purpose.
**Purpose:**

**Saving Knowledge:** This basically refers to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Saving knowledge is that which must be believed for salvation. This knowledge includes our sinful state, and therefore condemned position, before the Creator God; the means by which God has accomplished salvation (in essence, the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation to God) – through the sinless life, substitutionary death, and exaltation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; and the need to repent of sin and belief in this good news (1 Cor. 15:1-4; Acts 16:30-31; Rom. 3:19-26; 2 Cor. 5:21; 2 Tim. 3:15).

**Faith:** This certainly includes the previous, but is broader in scope (i.e. the Christian faith), as what we would find in a Systematic Theology; doctrine in general. Some doctrines are obviously more serious and essential (e.g. Trinity) than others (e.g. the proper recipients of baptism). However, we are to strive to have right, biblical beliefs, even in areas that are non-essential (i.e. not necessary for salvation), such as church government and eschatological perspectives. The essentialness of a doctrine may be measured by how much it relates to and influences one’s understanding of the gospel. For instance, to deny the Trinity is to corrupt the Trinitarian nature of the gospel (e.g. Eph. 1:3-14; cf. Mt. 28:19), making the whole redemptive plan of God fall apart.

**Obedience:** This refers to Christian living (which involves sanctification), and is to be built upon a proper understanding of the gospel and sound doctrine (Phil. 1:27; 1 Tim. 1:10-11; Tit. 2:1ff). We do not have the right to invent our own moral standards, ethical standards, and regulations of worship. We must look to the Scriptures to discern how we may live unto God’s glory, pleasing Him in every way (e.g. Rom. 12:1-2).

**C. Contrasting Views: Reformed vs. Roman Catholic**

It should be remembered that the 1689 Confession, and those confessions that came before, has a historical context. Many of the doctrinal positions expressed in the Confession are done in opposition to some other doctrinal perspective. Well, the arch enemy of our doctrinal conviction on *sola Scriptura* is Roman Catholicism. For that reason I wish to take some time now to contrast these two views. It should be understood that it is not my intention here to attempt a full-on refutation of Roman Catholicism. I primarily want to contrast the two views so that we may have a fuller understanding of the historical background of the Confession and of the doctrine it articulates.

First, let us look at some additional statements on the doctrine of *sola Scriptura.*
**Reformed/Evangelicalism**

*Sola Scriptura:* The Church is a Bible-Based People, Sitting under the Infallible Authority of the Word

“We reaffirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured. We deny that any creed, council, or individual may bind a Christian’s conscience, [we deny] that the Holy Spirit speaks independently of or contrary to what is set forth in the Bible, or that personal spiritual experience can ever be a vehicle of revelation.”

“The Scriptures are the supreme standard and authority by which all human opinion, teaching, doctrine and statements of faith are to be tested.”

“Revelation. God has graciously disclosed his existence and power in the created order, and has supremely revealed himself to fallen human beings in the person of his Son, the incarnate Word. Moreover, this God is a speaking God who by his Spirit has graciously disclosed himself in human words: we believe that God has inspired the words preserved in the Scriptures, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, which are both record and means of his saving work in the world. These writings alone constitute the verbally inspired Word of God, which is utterly authoritative and without error in the original writings, complete in its revelation of his will for salvation, sufficient for all that God requires us to believe and do, and final in its authority over every domain of knowledge to which it speaks. We confess that both our finitude and our sinfulness preclude the possibility of knowing God’s truth exhaustively, but we affirm that, enlightened by the Spirit of God, we can know God’s revealed truth truly. The Bible is to be believed, as God’s instruction, in all that it teaches; obeyed, as God’s command, in all that it requires; and trusted, as God’s pledge, in all that it promises. As God’s people hear, believe, and do the Word, they are equipped as disciples of Christ and witnesses to the gospel.”

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Drew S. C. Mery (2013)
In contrast to the statements above, which express the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, we have the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which holds that Tradition (supposed oral teachings passed down by the apostles to their successors – the Pope and bishops) is equal with Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church (the Pope and bishops) has authoritative interpretation of the Scriptures.

**Roman Catholicism**

*Sola Ecclesia*: The Bible is a Church-Based Book, Sitting under the Infallible Authority of the Church 8

“As a result [of the transmission of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition to the successors of the apostles] the Church [i.e. Magisterium], to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, ‘does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.’” 9

“The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and to the bishops in communion with him.” 10

“That the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith or morals; and that therefore such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irrefromable of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church.

But if any one—which may God avert—presume to contradict this our definition: let him be anathema.” 11

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8 I get this from James White. White recognizes that Catholics would not, and do not, use this terminology for themselves; however, he makes a good case that this is essentially the Catholic position, whether they refer to it this way or not. Further, Tim Staples, a Roman Catholic apologist, actually referred to the Bible as a Church-based book in a debate with James White. [http://youtu.be/Dhnez4NAGtg](http://youtu.be/Dhnez4NAGtg). Accessed on August 25, 2013.


10 Ibid., No. 100.

The differences between the two positions should be blatantly obvious. Again, while it is not my purpose here to attempt a refutation of the Roman Catholic position, I trust that what we have already considered in regard to the biblical evidence of *sola Scriptura* will suffice in demonstrating that Rome’s position is not simply in error, but that it greatly undermines the true nature and power of the Scriptures.\(^\text{12}\)

**SUMMARY**

This is a foundational paragraph of the 1689 Confession. Revelation (how we come to know God) and the nature and purpose of the Scriptures is foundational to the whole of our Christian faith. That is why it’s important that we clearly understand the material in this paragraph, especially when it comes to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. This doctrine is vitally important to Evangelical Christianity (biblical Christianity, broadly speaking), and that is why it is one of the most severely attacked doctrines by Roman Catholics and others (Mormons and Jehovah’s Witness also reject it). This should alert you to the great importance of what we have just covered in this lesson, and it should prompt you to action.

Many of the truths discussed in this lesson will be elaborated upon throughout the remainder of Chapter 1.

**APPLICATION**

In light of the things covered in this paragraph of the Confession, let us now consider a few brief points of application.

1. The preaching of the Scriptures ought to be the center of every church’s worship. God speaks to us through His word (2 Tim. 2:15-4:5).

2. Both individually and corporately, we should be committed to daily reading, studying, meditating upon, and memorizing Scripture (Ps. 119:9, 11; 2 Tim. 2:15).

3. This should remind us of our privilege in and responsibility for evangelism – spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. People won’t be saved through general revelation, they need to hear the gospel, and Christ has instructed His disciples to go into the world and make disciples, promising that He will be present with us (Mt. 28:18-20).

4. This should motivate and inform our worship. We should be joyously thankful to God for preserving His word the way He has, so that we can take it with us wherever we go and be strengthened, encouraged, and safeguarded by it.

\(^{12}\) For further support of *sola Scriptura*, see *Sola Scriptura* (by James White); *Sola Scriptura* (by R. C. Sproul); *Holy Scripture: The Ground and Pillar of Our Faith*, 3 Vol. (by David King and William Webster); and *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible* (edited by Don Kistler).