

# Sufficiency & Perfection of Scriptures vs. Human Traditions

by James Arminius

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*The sermon discusses the sufficiency and perfection of Scripture in opposition to human traditions, arguing that all necessary doctrines for salvation are contained in Scripture.*

**Scripture:** John 20:31, 1 Corinthians 2:12, 2 Timothy 3:16, 1 Peter 4:11, 2 Peter 1:21

**Topics:** "Scripture Sufficiency", "Church Tradition"

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## Description

James Arminius preaches on the sufficiency and perfection of the Holy Scriptures in opposition to human traditions, emphasizing that all doctrines necessary for the salvation of the Church were delivered by the apostles over fifteen hundred years ago. He discusses Divine traditions and the opinion of the Papists, highlighting the importance of Divine doctrine manifested by a Divine act. Arminius addresses the controversy with the Papists in three questions regarding the sufficiency of Scripture, the necessity of unwritten traditions, and how to ascertain the certainty of Divine doctrines.

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## Transcript

DISPUTATION 3

ON THE SUFFICIENCY AND PERFECTION OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES IN OPPOSITION TO HUMAN TRADITIONS

RESPONDENT: DE COIGNEE

Because the Papists contend for unwritten traditions, against the entire perfection of Scripture, as if it were for every thing sacred and dear to them. that they may be able to obtrude, on mankind, many dogmas, which, even by their own confession, are not comprised in the Scriptures, and to assume to themselves an irrefragible authority in the church; it seems, that we shall not spend our time unprofitably, if, in a few Theses, we discuss in the fear of God what ought to be maintained on the subject of Divine traditions and on the opinion of the Papists.

I. The word "Tradition," according to its derivation, signifies the act of delivering; but having been enlarged through usage to denote the object about which the act is occupied, it also signifies the doctrine itself that is delivered. We ascribe this epithet, in either or both of its senses, to a Divine acceptance, on account of

its cause which is God, to distinguish it from that which is human. (1 Cor. ii, 12, 13.) And we say, "That is excellently Divine which is such at the same time in its act and in its object." We define it, Divine doctrine, manifested by a Divine act, with less excellence, by men; because, however Divine it is in its object, still it is human in the act of tradition. (2 Pet. i, 21.) The apostle Paul had regard to this when he said, "As a wise master-builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon." (1 Cor. iii, 10.) And St. Peter, when he said, "if any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." (1 Pet. iv, 11.)

II. Divine tradition, both with respect to its object and to its act, is variously distributed. In regard to its object. (1.) According to the actions which it requires to be performed to itself by men, we distinguish it into that which is of Faith, (1 John v, 13,) and to which we add hope, and into that which relates to morals. In the first, it is offered as an object to be believed, in the other as one to be performed. (Luke xxiv, 27; Mark i, 15; Matt. xxi, 22, 23; ix, 13.) (2.) From the adjuncts of the act required, we call one act necessary to righteousness and salvation, while another is supplementary to that which is necessary. (Heb. ix, 10.) (3.) From the duration of time, we call one perpetual and immutable, another temporary and subject to change according to the appointment of its author. (John iv, 21-23.) (4.) According to its extent, we call one universal, which binds all believers either those of all ages of the world, or those who exist at the same time; and another particular, which has reference to certain persons whether they be many or few, such as that which respects the legal ceremonies and the Levitical priesthood. (Rom. 2,:26, 27.)

III. Tradition is distinguished, in regard to the act. (1.) From its subject, into internal and external. An internal one is that which is made to the mind by the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (Isa. lix, 21; with Ephes. i, 17-21.) To this we likewise refer that which is made to the internal senses, by sensible images formed in the inward receptacle of images. (1 Cor. ii, 10.) An external tradition is that which is made by means of signs presented to the external senses; among these the principal place is occupied by the word, in the delivery of which, two methods are employed, an enunciation made by oral speech and writing. (Rom. x, 17; 1 Cor. i, 28; 2 Thess. ii, 13-14; Gen. iii, 9- 19; xii, 1-3; Ezek. ii, 5; v, 1-3.) (2.) From its causes, into immediate and mediate. An immediate one is that which proceeds from God, without the intervention of man. Let permission also be granted, to us, for the sake of greater convenience of doctrine, to reckon under immediate tradition that which is made by angels, lest we be compelled to introduce many mediate traditions subordinate to each other. A mediate act of tradition is that which is performed by God, as the chief author, through the hands of a man peculiarly sanctified for its execution. (3.) According to its dignity and authority, it may be distributed into primary and secondary; so that the primary may be one, transacted indeed by man, but by a man so instructed and governed by the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit, (2 Sam. xxiii, 2, 3,) that "it may not be he himself that speaks, but the Spirit of the Father that is in him;" (Matt. x, 20;) that he may not himself be the crier, but the voice of God crying;" not himself the Scribe, but the amanuensis of the Holy Spirit. (2 Tim. iii, 16; 2 Pet. i, 21.) The secondary is that which is indeed according to the appointment of God, but by the will of man who administers the act of tradition at his own option. (1 Pet. iv, 11.)

IV. Internal tradition is always and absolutely necessary to the salvation of men. For in no way, except by a revelation and an inward sealing of the Holy Spirit, (2 Cor. i, 20-22) can any man perceive, and by an assured faith apprehend the mind of God, however it may be manifested and confirmed by external signs. (1 Cor. ii, 10-16.) External tradition is necessary through the pleasure of the Divine will, whether we consider that will universally; for without it he can abundantly instruct the mind of man. (1 Cor. 3,:7-10; 2 Cor. iv, 6.) Or whether we consider it according to special modes; for it is sometimes delivered by the

pronunciation of lively sounds, and at other times by writing, and at times by both methods, according to his own good pleasure, and which of them soever he has seen proper to employ. (1 Cor. v, 9; Exod. 24,:7; 2 Thess. ii, 13, 14; Luke xvi, 27-31.) It is, from this very circumstance, necessary to men; and from it the inconclusiveness of this argument is apparent, "Because God formerly instructed his own church without the Scriptures by the words which he spoke himself, therefore, the Scriptures are now unnecessary."

V. Though all the doctrines delivered by God, either from his own lips or in writing, possess Divine authority; yet we may distinguish between them, and may, according to certain respects, claim a greater authority for one than for another. (1.) The efficient cause makes the principal difference. For whatever doctrine it wills more, [than any other,] it makes that doctrine be of greater authority. Thus it is said, "I will have mercy, and not sacrifice." (Matt. ix, 13.) (2.) The condition of him who administers the doctrine, obtains for it a greater or a less degree of authority. "For if the word spoken by angels, was steadfast," etc, how much more is the doctrine which is announced to us by the Son? (Heb. ii, 2-5.) (3.) The object of the doctrine produces the same effect. For, according to it, some precepts are called "the weightier matters of the law," (Matt. xxiii, 23,) while others are called "the least commandments" (Matt. v, 19;) and thus the precepts of the second table yield to those of the first. (Luke xiv, 26.) In this view the Apostle said, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation," in which expression let the emphatic word be observed, "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." (1 Tim. i, 15.) (4.) The nearer and more leading tendency which any doctrine has to the end proposed by the whole, the greater prevalence and authority does it possess. "If the ministration of death and of condemnation is glorious, how much more doth the ministration of life and righteousness exceed in glory!" (2 Cor. iii, 9.) (5.) The very mode of delivery adds weight to the authority. For, lest that should escape which had before been delivered only in words, the author himself commits it to writing, and thus, when by a double act, it is entrusted to the memory of others, he points it out in a manner far more excellent, than if he had been content to recommend it solely by pronouncing it in words. (2 Pet. iii, 1, 2.) And here let the hypothesis be observed, in which it is presupposed that the matter had been delivered partly by speaking and by writing, and partly by speaking alone. The more frequent and solicitous recommendation of the written doctrine serves to strengthen this argument. (Deut. xvii, 19; 1 Tim. iv, 13; 2 Pet. i, 19.)

VI. Having given this exposition of the subject, let us proceed with the controversy which we have with the Papists, and pass upon it a few brief animadversions. It seems to be comprehended in these three questions. (1.) Is every doctrine already delivered, which has been, is now, or ever will be necessary to the salvation of the church? Does any thing of this kind yet remain to be delivered? And if it has been really delivered, when was that done? (2.) In what are those doctrines contained which it is necessary for the church to believe and practice in order to be saved? Are they in the Scriptures alone; or partly in the Scriptures, and partly in unwritten traditions from their first author? (3.) How can it be made evident with certainty to the consciences of believers, that any particular doctrine is Divine?

VII. With regard to the First question, our opinion is, that all the doctrines necessary for the salvation of the Church Universal, have been already delivered, above fifteen hundred years ago; and that no tradition has been made of any new doctrine that is necessary for the salvation of believers, since the days of the apostles. We establish our opinion by the following arguments: (1.) Because in Christ, and in his Gospel, "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (Col. ii, 3.) But the apostles have perfectly announced Christ and his Gospel; (Acts xx, 26, 27;) so that an anathema is pronounced on him who preaches any other gospel than that which the apostles have preached and the churches have received. (Gal. i, 8, 9.) But that man preaches another gospel, who adds any thing to it as being necessary to the

salvation of believers. (2.) Because the whole "church has been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets." (Ephes. ii, 20; Rev. xxi, 14.) This is not true, if there be a doctrine necessary to the salvation of any church, which has not been revealed through the prophets and apostles. (3.) Because the whole Catholic Church is one body, consisting of particular churches that possess the same nature and principles as the whole; and this Church is animated by one spirit, and led into all truth, and being called into one hope of the same inheritance, it has "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Ephes. iv, 4, 6,) and sealed into "the communion of the same body and blood of the Lord," by a participation of one cup and bread. (1 Cor. x, 16, 17.) (4.) Because "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and to-day, and forever." Whence the apostle infers, that it is wrong for the Church to be "carried about with divers and strange doctrines." (Heb. xiii, 8,-9.)

VIII. Though some of the Popish divines profess to assent to this truth, yet indications sufficiently manifest of their dissent from it are extant in their writings, especially in those of the Canonists. In the first place, the epithets of Universal Bishop, Supreme Pastor, Prime Head, Bridegroom, the Perfecter and Illuminator of the Catholic Church his Bride, which are ascribed to the Roman Pontiff, do not admit of this limitation of tradition. Then, the authority of governing, commanding and forbidding, of establishing and abrogating laws, of judging and condemning, and of loosing and binding, an immense and infinite authority, which is not merely attributed to him, but is actually assumed and exercised by him, excludes the same kind of circumscription. To which may be added the Decree, by which it is decided to be necessary for salvation, that every human creature be placed in subjection to the Roman Pontiff; and that, by which authentic authority is ascribed to the ancient Latin translation of the Scriptures. But, not to multiply instances, we hold it for a general argument of this dissension, that they dare not enter into an exact enumeration of unwritten traditions, and fix the number of them; they avoid this, that they may reserve to themselves the power of producing tradition in any controversy. Some of them, therefore, assert, that other doctrines are necessary according to the different states of the Church.

IX. But we most willingly confess, that the tradition which we call secondary will continue in the Church to the end of the world; for by it the doctrines which have, through the prophets and apostles, been committed to her, are by her, further dispensed to her children. For this reason, the Church is called "the pillar and ground of the truth," (1 Tim. iii, 15,) but only secondarily after the apostles, who, on account of the primary tradition, are distinguished by the title of "pillars," (Gal. ii, 9,) and "foundations," (Rev. xxi, 14,) before those epithets were bestowed on the church.

X. With regard to the Second question, [§ 6,] we say that the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament perfectly contain all doctrines which are necessary to the salvation of believers and the glory of God. This is manifest, (1.) From express testimonies of Scripture, [see Disputation 2, Thesis 19,] forbidding any addition to be made to those things which have been commanded, and commanding that "no man be wise above what is written," (1 Cor. iv, 6,) though in the former of these, it is evident from the text that Moses is speaking about those precepts which were comprised in writing. (2.) From the very substance of the doctrines; and this in various ways. The scriptures contain in a complete form the doctrine of the Law and of the Gospel; they also perfectly embrace the doctrine of faith, hope and charity. They deliver the full knowledge of God and of Christ, in which is placed life eternal. They are called, and truly so, "the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament," but to a testament nothing ought to be added. (3.) From the end at which they aim and which they attain. "These things are written, that ye may believe; and that, believing, ye may have life." (John xx, 31.) "Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life." (v, 39.) (4.) From their efficacy; because, without [the aid of] any other doctrine, they

sufficiently hinder any man from going into the place of torment, (Luke xvi, 28, 29;) and they render "the man of God wise unto salvation through faith, and thoroughly furnished unto all good works." (2 Tim. iii, 15-17.) (5.) From the manner of speech usually employed in the Scriptures, by which "the prophets" are understood to mean the writings of the prophets, "the prophets" and "the word of prophecy" signify the prophecies of Scripture. (2 Pet. i, 19-21.) What God said and did is ascribed to the Scriptures: thus, For the Scriptures saith unto Pharaoh;" (Rom. ix, 17;) "the Scripture, foreseeing, &c., preached before the gospel unto Abraham;" (Gal. iii, 8;) "the Scripture hath concluded all under sin." (iii, 22.)

XI. The Papists assert, on the contrary, that all things necessary to salvation are not contained in the Scriptures; but partly in the Scriptures, and partly in unwritten traditions. This their opinion they endeavour to establish, not only by the Scriptures themselves, but by the testimonies of Popes, Councils, and Fathers, nay, by certain examples which they produce of necessary doctrines which are not comprehended within the limits of Scripture. As we shall examine the strength of each of these arguments separately in the discussion which we have now commenced, we may remark by way of anticipation, that the passages of Scripture which they usually quote for this purpose, are either forcibly wrested from their correct signification, or do not determine the proposition; that the testimonies of Popes, Councils, and Fathers, being those of mere men, do not operate to our prejudice; that the instances which they adduce are either confirmed from the Scriptures, or are not necessary to salvation. This separation we consider of such necessity, that when it is once granted that they are necessary to salvation, it follows that they can and that they must be confirmed by the Scriptures; and when it is granted that they cannot be confirmed by the Scriptures, it follows that they are not necessary to salvation. So immovable and certain is this truth to our minds, that all doctrines necessary to salvation are contained in the Scriptures.

XII. To the Third question, [§ 5,] we reply: As one Delivery of Divine doctrine is primary, and another secondary; so likewise one Attestation [witnessing] respecting the divinity of the doctrine is primary, while another is secondary. (John v, 36, 37; 1 John v, 7.) The Primary attestation is that of God himself, to whom it appertains properly, originally, and per se to bear witness to his own doctrine. But he employs a two-fold mode of bearing witness: one external, which is presented to the senses of those to whom the doctrine is proposed, (John iii, 2; Heb. ii, 4; 1 Cor. i, 6-8,) and is a preparative for creating faith in the doctrine, even when this doctrine is not understood. Another internal, which impresses on the mind a true understanding of the doctrine, and an undoubted approval of it, which is the necessary, proper and immediate cause of that faith which God requires to be given to his word, and which alone is saving. The Secondary attestation is that of the Church. For having been herself certified, by means of the primary attestation, (which is that of God,) of the divinity of this doctrine, she both gives her hand and seal as a witness that God is true, (John iii, 33,) and she bears her testimony to the doctrine received from the God of truth. This testimony is pleasing to God, due to the doctrine, honourable to the church, and useful to men. (1 John v, 9; John v, 34-36.) But it is to be observed, that this testimony of the church is human and not Divine, and is less than the preceding, which is potent only in preparing the hearts, by a sort of reverence that it obtains for the doctrine, that the hearts so prepared may with sincerity, by the internal witnessing of God, yield their assent to it. (John xv, 26, 27.) Under that part of the Primary testimony which is external, we comprise the testimony of prophets, apostles, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, who are "workers together with God," provided they have been immediately called [by God himself.] But we refer it to the Secondary testimony, if they have been called mediately by the church. The Papists, who ascribe less to the internal attestation, and more to that which is secondary, than what we have explained, are deservedly rejected by us.

XIII. Having explained these matters, we grant, that the apostles delivered to the churches some things relating to order, decency, and the rights to be observed in them, which they did not commit to writing, (1 Cor. xi, 34;) but those things do not concern the substance either of the Law or the Gospel, are not necessary to salvation, are neither immutable, perpetual, nor universal, but are accommodated to the existing condition of the church, and the circumstances in which she is placed. We further grant, that either single churches, or many by mutual consent, or that all churches provided they could so agree, may frame certain ritual canons for their good order and decency, and for such direction in those duties which must of necessity be performed in them, as may contribute to their present edification. (1 Cor. xiv, 40.) But these conditions must be observed respecting them: (1.) That these rites be not repugnant to the Written Word. (Col. ii, 18-23.) (2.) That they neither have superstition intermixed with them, nor encourage it. (3.) That they neither be accounted as divine worship, nor cast a snare upon consciences. (4.) That they be neither more numerous, nor more burdensome in practice, than may render them easy of observance. (Acts xv, 10, 28.) (5.) That the church do not deprive herself of the liberty of changing, adding, or taking away, as she shall consider her present edification to require. Such rites as these being usefully established in a church, it is unlawful for any one, of his own private authority, to gainsay or attack them, unless he be ambitious of having his name emblazoned in the list of disorderly persons, and among the disturbers of the peace of church. (1 Cor. xiv, 32, 33; 2 Thess. iii, 6.)

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