

The Authority of the Scriptures

extract from Proposition III § i

§ i. The first part of this thesis doesn't need any defense, though it is a good defense for us, and will help to sweep away the calumny (one among many) which accuses us of vilifying and denying the Scriptures. What we say of them here makes it clear how highly we value them, since without any deceit we consider them the most excellent writings in the world. No other writings can be considered better, nor even equal in many respects. We freely acknowledge that the authority of the Scriptures does not depend on the approval or laws of any church or assembly; neither can they be subjected to the fallen, corrupt and defiled reason of man. In this we freely agree with the Protestants against the error of the Roman Catholics, but we cannot go as far as the Protestants do, to say that the Scriptures' authority depends on any quality or power in the writings themselves; instead we ascribe it all to the Spirit from which they proceeded.

We confess that there is a majesty in the style, a coherence in the parts, a good purpose in the whole. But since the natural man cannot discern these things, but only the spiritual man, only the Spirit of God can give us the belief in the Scriptures which can satisfy our conscience; some of the chief Protestants are forced to acknowledge this in their private writings and public statements.

Though he says he is able to prove that if there is a God in heaven, these writings proceeded from him, Calvin recognizes that another knowledge is necessary (Institutes, book 1, chapter 7, section 4-5):¹

¹ The text given here is Barclay's, which seems to be a paraphrase of Calvin's text <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iii.viii.html>

“If we respect the conscience, so that it may not be daily molested with doubts and may not stick at every scruple, it is necessary that this persuasion which we speak of be taken higher than human reason, judgment, or conjecture: that is, from the secret testimony of the Spirit.” Again, “To those who ask that we prove to them by reason that God inspired Moses and the prophets to speak, I answer, that the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason.” And again, “Let this remain a firm truth, that only he whom the Holy Spirit hath persuaded can rely on the Scripture with true certainty.” And finally, “This is a judgment which cannot be begotten by anything but a heavenly revelation,” etc. . . .

The same is also affirmed in the fifth article of the confession of faith of the churches of Holland, confirmed by the Synod of Dort.² “We receive these books as the only ones that are holy and canonical, not so much because the church receives and approves them, as because the Spirit of God witnesses in our hearts that they are from God.” . . .

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition III § i (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 63-64 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 36-37.

² [The Synod of Dort \(1618-1619\) was extremely influential in Calvinist theology.](#)