

Biblical arguments

extract from Proposition III § vi, vii, viii

§ vi. . . . Up to now we have shown what we believe, and what we do not believe, concerning the Holy Scriptures, and we hope we have given them their proper place. But the people that insist that the Scriptures are the only, certain, and principal rule have some arguments by which they try to prove their doctrine, even some from the Scripture itself (though the Scripture doesn't call itself that kind of rule anywhere). Therefore I shall briefly describe these objections and answer them, before I come to the end of this subject.

§ vii. Their first objection is usually drawn from Isaiah 8:20, "To the law and to the testimony; if they do not speak according to this Word, it is because there is no Light in them." They claim that "law," "testimony," and "Word" mean the Scriptures.

I answer that this is begging the question, and remains unproved. I do not know of any reason we may not safely say that this law and Word are inward. But suppose it was outward; that does not prove their case at all, nor does it argue against us. We can confess, without any prejudice to our cause, that for the Jews the outward law was more particularly a rule than it is for us; their law was outward and literal, but ours is explicitly affirmed to be inward and spiritual under the New Covenant, as has already been said. So rather than being against us, this scripture is for us. . . .

Their second objection is from John 5:39, "Search the Scriptures," etc.

Here, they say, we are commanded by Christ himself to search the Scriptures.

I answer that we do not at all deny that the Scriptures ought to be searched. We are very willing to be tested by

the Scriptures, as was declared above. But the question is, whether they are the principal and only rule? This passage is so far from proving this, that it actually proves the opposite. For Christ reproves them here for having too high an esteem for the Scriptures and for neglecting him, who was to be preferred above the Scriptures, and to whom they bear witness, as the following words declare: “for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are what testifies about me; and you will not come to me so that you might have life.” This shows that while they thought they had eternal life in the Scriptures, they neglected to come to Christ to have life, which is what the Scriptures bear witness of. This fits our purpose well, since nowadays our adversaries also exalt the Scriptures, and think to have life in them, which is the same as looking on the Scriptures as the only principal rule and way to life; and yet they refuse to come to the Spirit of which the Scriptures testify, that is, the inward spiritual law which could give them life. So the cause of this people’s ignorance and unbelief was not their lack of respect for the Scriptures, which they knew and esteemed highly, yet Christ testifies in the preceding verses that they had “neither seen the Father, nor heard his voice at any time, nor did they have his Word abiding in them.” If they had the Word abiding in them, then they would have believed in the Son.

Moreover that verse can be understood in the indicative mood, “You search the Scriptures,” rather than the imperative,* and the Greek word will support that interpretation, and Pasor translates it that way.¹ Because of the reproof which follows it, this seems to be the more genuine interpretation, as Cyril long ago commented.

¹ Many modern translations also render it in the indicative, such as the New King James, the New International, and the New Revised Standard.

§ viii. Their third objection is based on these words (Acts 17:11): “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, because they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, to find out whether these things were so.”

Objection: Here, they say, the Bereans are commended for searching the Scriptures, and making them the rule.

I answer that it does not follow from this that the Scriptures are the principal or only rule; their searching the Scriptures, or being commended for it, does not imply any such thing. We recommend and approve the use of the Scriptures in that way as much as anyone does. It does not follow that we affirm them to be the principal and only rule.

Second, it should be observed that these were the Jews of Berea, to whom these Scriptures, which were the law and the prophets, were more particularly a rule. The thing they were examining was whether the birth, life, works, and sufferings of Christ fulfilled the prophecies that went before him; so that it was most proper for them, being Jews, to test the apostle’s teaching by the Scriptures, since he argued that his doctrine was the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, it says first that “they received the Word with cheerfulness,” and in the second place “they searched the Scriptures.” It does not say that they searched the Scriptures first and then received the Word. . . .

Finally, if it were true that this commendation of the Jewish Bereans showed that the Scriptures were the principal and only rule by which to test the apostles’ teaching, what would become of the Gentiles? How could they ever come to receive the faith of Christ, since they neither knew the Scriptures, nor believed them? We see in the end of the same chapter that the apostle, preaching to the Athenians, took another method, and directed them to something of God *within* themselves, that they might *feel their way to* him. He did not start by converting them to the Jewish religion and to belief in the law and the prophets,

and from there to prove the coming of Christ; no, he took a shorter way.

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition III § vi, vii, viii (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 78-81 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 47-50.