But What Does It Look Like in Practice? Applying the Formal and Material Sufficiency of Scripture to Biblical Counseling

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Abstract: *This article explores how the Reformation doctrines of formal and material sufficiency of Scripture apply to the practice of biblical counseling. It addresses the ethical question of whether Christians may appropriately use extra-biblical resources in counseling and proposes a nuanced framework for doing so. After defining key theological terms and distinctions—including formal versus material sufficiency, and* prima, norma, *and* suprema Scriptura—*the article critiques three common misapplications: Roman Catholic traditionalism, progressive trajectory models, and fundamentalist biblicism. Although Scripture is sufficient in both content and authority, it must be rightly interpreted, applied, and integrated with other sources of knowledge under the Bible's ultimate authority. Using theological reasoning and historical examples, the article demonstrates that counselors must start with Scripture* (prima), *test all other inputs by Scripture* (norma), *and remain continually subject to its correction* (suprema). *This tri-fold approach offers a biblically faithful yet pastorally sensitive method for Christian soul care.*

Key Words: *biblical counseling, formal sufficiency, material sufficiency,* norma Scriptura, prima Scriptura, *sufficiency of Scripture,* suprema Scriptura, *theological methodology*

Several topics fit under *Sola Scriptura* because they operate, more or less, as corollaries. These corollaries include Scripture's primacy, necessity, comprehensiveness, perfection, clarity, and—to the topic of this article—sufficiency. Specifically, this article explores a significant ethical question about biblical counseling: Is it good and right for Christians to use extra-biblical resources when counseling? And if so, what are the best practices for going about it? Like so many ethical issues, even when the line from Scripture to principle seems relatively clear, the line from principle to best practices often does not.[1]

This article first surveys what theologians typically mean when they discuss the formal sufficiency and material sufficiency of Scripture. Second, it looks briefly at how these principles have been (more or less successfully) applied by the church. Some seem to be confused about material sufficiency, interpreting it to mean that biblical counseling needs only the Bible. We will see that this is not the view of the Protestant Reformers. Last the article explores how the principles of formal and material sufficiency should be applied to biblical counseling. It will argue that three concepts should operate as guiding principles: *prima Scriptura*, *norma Scriptura,* and *suprema Scriptura*—the Bible must be our starting point, our norming guide, and our final judge.

Definitions

Sometimes in debates the dialog partners talk past each other because they are using different definitions for the pertinent terms. This can be true even for the term, "biblical counseling." In a very helpful editorial, Greg Gifford laments that the current climate has left "the term biblical counseling somewhat ambiguous."[2] He argues instead for "soul care" or, to be more precise, "biblical soul care." He explains, "[S]oul care has been the historically dominant way in which biblical counseling has been articulated."[3] An article on the website of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC) gives a workable definition of biblical counseling: "Since the beginning of the biblical counseling movement in 1970, biblical counselors have argued that counseling is a ministry of the Word, just like preaching or missions. As a ministry, counseling must be defined according to sound biblical theology rather than secular principles of psychology."[4]

On the theological side of the aisle, John Feinberg makes a similar

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[1] John Frame explains that the sufficiency of Scripture "is an ethical doctrine" because it "takes away excuses for disobedience" (*The Doctrine of the Word of God* [P&R, 2010], 226).

[2] Greg Gifford, "Editorial, Introduction, Purpose and Overview," *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 1.1 (2017): 10.

[3] Gifford, "Editorial, Introduction, Purpose and Overview," 11.

[4] "2016 Biblical Counseling Book of the Year." https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/2016-counseling-book-of-the-year-2/ (accessed 03/25/25).

complaint about "sufficiency."[5] The term is used in a variety of ways, sometimes with subtle differences. Because the word can and does have a range of meanings, at times those involved in the discussion misunderstand what the other is saying.

- **Necessary and Sufficient:** In books on logic and in bar exams for lawyers, this is the distinction most often discussed. A necessary condition is something required for an outcome to happen but having it doesn't guarantee the outcome on its own. A sufficient condition, however, is something that, if present, ensures the outcome, though it may not be the only way to achieve it.

- **Sufficient and Efficient:** This distinction is used often in discussions about the Atonement. The Medieval theologian, Peter Lombard, appears to have been the first to describe the Atonement as "sufficient for all; efficient for the elect." We can use the sufficient/efficient contrast to describe the Bible's sufficiency in a similar way: Scripture is sufficiently comprehensible to all; but it is efficiently understood by the regenerate.

- **Progressive and Completed Sufficiency:** John Feinberg, John Frame, and Wayne Grudem make much of this distinction (though they use different terms).[6] Unlike the Quran, the Bible was not given all at once. God revealed his will to us progressively over a period of nearly 1500 years. The Mosaic Covenant was, in one sense, sufficient *for its time*. As Psalms 19 and 119 declare, Scripture was perfect even before the canon was closed. Yet as the Old Testament prophets themselves made clear, another covenant, a New Covenant, was needed. Grudem affirms the progressive nature of sufficiency and thus defines sufficiency to mean that "Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have *at each stage* of redemptive history."[7] So there is a sense in which Scripture has been progressively sufficient. Frame defines the completeness of God's revelation as the "particular sufficiency" of Scripture. The finality of Christ's redemption implies the end of canonical revelation. Frame explains, "When redemption is final,

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[5] John Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture* (Crossway, 2018), 681–85.

[6] Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 684–85; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), 127–30. Instead of progressive and completed, Frame distinguishes between general and particular (see *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 225–28).

[7] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 127.

revelation is also final."[8]

- **Material and Formal Sufficiency:** Perhaps the distinction made most often (and I believe this distinction to be the most pertinent concerning biblical counseling) is between material sufficiency and formal sufficiency. This type of distinction can be found in the writings of Timothy Ward, Kevin Vanhoozer, or the Roman Catholic theologian, Yves Congar.[9]

Material sufficiency means that we have enough of the Bible, that is, the Bible contains what God wants it to contain. Material sufficiency speaks of its adequacy. Material sufficiency affirms that we don't need a 67th book of the Bible; we don't need additional revelation from Mohammed or Joseph Smith. *Here's the point: We have all the Bible we need; however, this does not mean that the Bible is all we need.* The Bible itself teaches that we need more than the Bible: we need the Holy Spirit, and we need the church. Material sufficiency has never meant that we need only the Bible.

Formal sufficiency speaks of the Bible's authority. It means that Scripture interprets Scripture. The Bible is sufficient to sit in judgment over all our thoughts and actions. All theological formulations, affirmations, and conclusions, including those made in this article, are subject to the teachings of Scripture. Whatever beliefs I may have that are inadvertently contrary to the Bible are wrong. And when believers disagree, Scripture possesses the formal sufficiency to adjudicate between contrary opinions about theological and ethical matters.

Biblical Sufficiency Applied

Affirming the Bible's material and formal sufficiency involves a recognition that there are levels of theological teachings. Fully exploring these levels are beyond the scope of this article, so allow me to present an informal outline of them.

First, the Bible presents *explicit teachings*. For example, Scripture teaches that three days after Jesus was crucified, he rose from the dead. Hard stop. If words have any meaning at all, the Bible declares that our Lord is alive. Some teachings are so clear that they are plain to all.

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[8] Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 227.

[9] Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (InterVarsity Press, 2009); Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Brazos, 2016); Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: The Biblical, Historical, and Theological Evidence for Catholic Teaching on Tradition* (Basilica Press, 1998).

Second are the *necessary corollaries.* Corollaries are deductions, subsequent to and dependent upon the explicit teachings of the Bible. But notice the word "necessary." They are inferences, but they are necessary ones. Even though they are deduced from Scripture, they are not merely implied. Rather, they are required entailments. These are conclusions that, if we are to be Christians, we must affirm them. An example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. Scripture provides us with no extended explanation of the Trinity. The very word "trinity" is not in the Bible. But even though there is no chapter in the Bible devoted to the subject, it is a necessary conclusion or deduction from the whole body of Scripture. So, while the first level teachings (i.e., "explicit teachings") emphasizes what the apostles and prophets said, this level of teachings (i.e., "necessary corollaries") emphasizes what we *must say* based on the teachings of the apostles and prophets. This is why we do not refer to this set of truths as merely Christian doctrine but as Church dogma. The Apostles Creed is a good summary of essential Church dogma. Later we will look closely at the processes the early Fathers found necessary in order to formulate trinitarian doctrine.

Third are *theological constructs.* These are theological formulations deduced from Scripture and the accompanying paradigms or models that attempt to systematize those formulations. For example, the Bible clearly teaches the concept of covenant. However, theologians debate about how the covenants operate, what they require, how they relate to each other, and how they relate to the people of God. Thus, there are a variety of models—Covenant theology and Dispensationalism are examples—and within each model there are variations on the theme.

The doctrinal subject at hand, the sufficiency of Scripture, serves as another example of a theological construct. As Feinberg points out, "Scripture nowhere formally defines sufficiency," and "no passage explicitly raises the question of whether Scripture is sufficient and [then] answers it."[10] (However, he hastens to say that the Bible presents plenty of warrant for affirming the doctrine.)

Next are the *applied ethical norms.* There's a reason why seminaries typically consider ethics to be part of theology. The ethical task of pastoral ministry makes theology necessary. Ethics can be simplistically described as the discipline of applying biblical principles to the issues of life. But which principles? And when multiple principles seem to apply, which principles should receive greater weight? It does not take away from Scripture's clarity to admit that the process of determining which principles should be brought to bear, and with what priority, is really, really, hard.

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[10] Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 681–82.

Examples of these challenges are legion. Pastors are called upon to counsel in a myriad of situations. A parishioner might work for a media company that produces many good programs but also others that are salacious and maybe even prurient; or perhaps a church member works for an advertising agency that has some clients who are noble while others are questionable; or one might work for a pharmaceutical company that produces life-saving drugs but it also manufactures abortifacients.[11] I personally know two men who both owned beer distributorships at the time of their respective conversions. The two professed Christ in different Baptist churches. One church required that the convert give up his distributorship while the other church did not. I suspect that if various denominations were polled, there would be a spectrum of opinions about what would be the best counsel.

A much more serious example is the issue of slavery in the United States. A good work that specifically highlights the theological basis of the ethical debate is Mark Noll's *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis.*[12] The antebellum debate in America over slavery works well as a historical example for several reasons. First, evangelicals were at the forefront of the debate. They were intellectually upstream, as leading thinkers and scholars, rather than intellectually swimming downstream as is typically the case today. Second, slavery is a matter about which the Bible has a great deal to say. Scripture contains significant content about the proper role and treatment of slaves and servants. In fact, one entire, albeit brief, book of the Bible, *Philemon*, is devoted to the subject. Third, the fact that evangelicals failed—failed miserably and disastrously—to arrive at a resolution indicates that either Scripture is not sufficient in matters of faith and practice, or that evangelicals did not properly exercise the *sola Scriptura* principle. I agree with Noll that it was the latter. They almost universally employed a "naked biblicism," an approach I'll discuss further shortly.

This is why mere principlizing is problematic. Theologians, such as Kevin Vanhoozer, point out that most of Scripture is narrative, and that the story of redemption should be understood as a theo-drama.[13] In this approach, emphasis is placed, not only on biblical principles, but also on biblical patterns and themes, and that we should understand ourselves as actors located in the final act of the divine drama. Rather than being given

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[11] These examples are adapted from Daniel Doriani. See Walter Kaiser, Daniel Doriani, et al., *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (Zondervan, 2009), 88–89.

[12] Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (University of Chapel Hill, 2006).

[13] Kevin Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Westminster-John Knox, 2014), 15–33.

an explicit, detailed script, we are commanded to fulfill the Great Commission given to us, in accordance with teachings provided in the inscripturated, Sacred Deposit of revelation, and follow the example modeled for us by the Lord Jesus. Ever since the Reformation, Protestants have affirmed that the Bible is formally and materially sufficient for this difficult task.

Three Misfires

Three misfires can serve as historical lessons that help us understand what we do and do not mean by sufficiency. The first misfire is *the magisterial tradition of the Roman Catholic Church*. It is important to remember that the biblical principle of *sola Scriptura* was formulated during the heat of the Reformation, and that the Roman Catholic Church explicitly rejects both the formal and material sufficiency of Scripture.

First, Roman Catholicism rejects the formal sufficiency of Scripture by contending that the Bible is the "remote rule of faith" whereas church teachings are the "immediate rule of faith."[14] The Bible is not sufficient to be its own interpreter. In other words, Roman Catholicism recognizes Scripture as authoritative, but the church must be in between the Bible and the laity, serving as the authoritative interpreter. Sometimes theologians identify this view as "Tradition I."[15]

Second, "Tradition II" within Roman Catholicism goes even further by denying the material sufficiency of Scripture. That is, some Roman Catholic theologians contend that church tradition has equal revelatory

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[14] Francis Schussler Fiorenza, *Systematic Theology* (Fortress, 2011), 23. Fiorenza explains that since Vatican I (1870) neo-scholastic Thomism has dominated Roman Catholic theology. Catholic theologians typically use the language of "remote rule" and "immediate rule" of faith to describe the relationship of the Bible and the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. The Bible is viewed through the lens of the Church's teaching. Scripture is authoritative, but the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church is the *final* authority in matters of faith and practice.

[15] Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Baker, 2000), 365–412; John Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Eerdmans, 2016), 7–15. See also "Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures," in *The Council of Trent: Session Four.* https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/fourth-session.htm (accessed 08/08/25).

authority, and, in fact, adds additional revelation that supplements Scripture.[16] This is how they justify certain teachings concerning Mary or purgatory that clearly go beyond anything revealed in Scripture.

The past few decades have seen a notable number of evangelical scholars make the pilgrimage to Rome. They often explain that it was a loss of confidence in Scripture's sufficiency that motivated their decision. An example of this is the former evangelical sociologist, Christian Smith. As he converted to Roman Catholicism, he published *The Bible Made Impossible* in which he denounced the biblicism that he saw dominating evangelicalism. He concludes, "*That on important matters the Bible apparently is not clear, consistent, and univocal enough to enable the best-intentioned, most highly skilled, believing readers to come to agreement as to what it teaches.*"[17] Space forbids a thorough answer, but two points should be noted. First, evangelicals agree about much more than we disagree. Since our disagreements are often rancorous and public, this fact is often overlooked. Second, Roman Catholicism is hardly a bastion of theological unity. Note the theological differences between two recent popes, Benedict XVI and Francis.

The second misfire is *the trajectory approach* of "moving beyond the Bible," employed often by those who identify as progressive evangelicals. The Roman Catholic Church was not the only opponent with whom the original Reformers had to address. The Radical Reformation contained factions that advocated mysticism or rationalism. These diverse and conflicting factions denied Scripture's sufficiency just as readily as Roman Catholic theologians, and in ways that were more subtle and dangerous. They argued that they were qualified to go beyond the Bible with their theological and ethical conclusions.

Today a similar approach is argued by proponents of the "redemptive trajectory model." This paradigm for interpreting the Bible suggests Scripture contains an ethical trajectory that moves progressively toward fuller expressions of justice, compassion, and inclusion. Some advocates are relatively cautious in their approach, while others use the trajectory model to justify theological and ethical judgments that they admit are beyond the teachings of Scripture. William Webb and I. Howard Marshall could be described as conservative proponents while Peter Enns and Kenton

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[16] Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology,* 371–75. Vatican II declared that "Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church." See Dei Verbum, 2.10. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html (accessed 08/08/25).

[17] Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Brazos, 2011), 25 (emphasis original).

Sparks are self-described progressives.[18]

One of the more controversial books published in 2024 was *The Widening of God's Mercy*, coauthored by the father and son team, Richard and Christopher Hays.[19] The elder Hays taught New Testament for years at Duke University while the son currently teaches Old Testament at Fuller Seminary. They admit that the New Testament does not allow same-sex marriage, but they argue, on the basis of the New Testament pattern of God's radical and shocking grace, for the full acceptance of same-sex couples into the fellowship of the church. They contend that the Holy Spirit is leading the church to full acceptance because God's grace has always been scandalous. The about-face by the elder Hays is particularly jarring. In the 1990s he published *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, in which he demonstrates that the New Testament prohibits homosexual behavior.[20]

Vanhoozer had it right when twenty years ago he warned that the trajectory model gives license to the interpreter to "lord it over the text."[21] One cannot help but wonder what Christians in the majority world think about the Hays duo's expressed conviction that they have discerned the leading of the Holy Spirit. One cannot help but notice that what they are convinced the Holy Spirit is now teaching about homosexuality just so happens to be exactly in line with the progressive zeitgeist of today's postmodern culture. This turnaround seems to confirm the worst fears about the trajectory model, namely that it replaces a sufficient Bible with a Bible that has a wax nose.

Opposite the progressive misfire of the trajectory model is a third misfire often committed by fundamentalists and many conservative evangelicals, the misfire of *naked biblicism*. Naked biblicism manifests itself by two approaches. The first is *solo Scriptura* ("I and my Bible, naked and unashamed"). Historically, this approach is best represented by the Stone-

Campbell school of interpretation, "no creed but the Bible." The interpretative process is ignored to the point of denying its existence.[22] Jamie Smith calls this *solo Scriptura* approach the "leapfrog model" of interpretation, a model that claims to be able to go directly to the Bible, uninfluenced by cultural context, tradition, or personal biases.[23] Proponents sometimes use the slogan, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it." However, what they're really saying is, "God said it, I interpret it, and that's the end of it." Ironically, this approach ends up with the autonomous individual as the final authority.[24]

The second identifying error of naked biblicism is *Scriptura nuda*. Proponents misconstrue material sufficiency to mean that "the Bible is all we need."[25] A recent example of this error can be found at the website, "The Sufficiency Statement." It provides a good definition of material sufficiency when it states, "[T]he doctrine of biblical sufficiency teaches that Christians require no additional revelation to understand how to please God in any area of life." However, two sentences later it states, "As this doctrine is applied to counseling, it means that Christians require no special knowledge or methodology drawn from outside Scripture to construct a system of counseling care." This is a clear and unfortunate example of the move from affirming "we have all the Bible we need" to "we need only the Bible."

Putting It All into Practice

So, what does applying Scripture's formal and material sufficiency look like for biblical counseling? The biblically faithful Christian counselor must be guided by three principles: *prima Scriptura, norma Scriptura,* and *suprema Scriptura.*

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[18] I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Baker, 2004); William Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (InterVarsity Press, 2001); Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Baker, 2005); Kenton Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Scholarship* (Baker, 2008).

[19] Christopher Hays and Richard Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story* (Yale University Press, 2024).

[20] Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (HarperOne, 1996).

[21] Kevin Vanhoozer, "Into the Great 'Beyond': A Theologian's Response to the Marshall Plan," in Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 51–60.

[22] Nathan Hatch, "*Sola Scriptura* and *Novus Ordo Seclorum*," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll (Oxford University Press, 1982), 59–78.

[23] James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (InterVarsity Press, 2000), 41.

[24] Nathan Hatch observes, "What strikes one in studying the use of the Bible in the early years of the American Republic, is how much weight becomes placed on private judgment and how little on the role of history, theology, and the collective will of the church…. This shift occurred gradually and without fanfare, concealed, I think, because innovators could exploit arguments as old and as trusted as Protestantism itself…. Yet somewhere along the line, I would argue, a revolution had taken place that made private judgment the ultimate tribunal for the exposition of Scripture" ("*Sola Scriptura* and *Novus Ordo Seclorum*," 70–71).

[25] See https://sufficiencystatement.com (accessed 05/05/25).

Prima Scriptura: Scripture is the *first* or *foundational* source of authority in all theological inquiry and Christian practice. Although this principle does not exclude the use of reason, tradition, or empirical observation, it insists that all such sources must begin with and be shaped by the revelation of God in Scripture.[26] This stands in contrast to the Roman Catholic tradition, particularly following Thomas Aquinas, which often begins theological reflection with an appeal to natural law or human reason.[27] In this framework, the truths of nature and reason are seen as parallel sources of knowledge, capable in some cases of leading to theological conclusions apart from special revelation.

This approach has things backwards. We must start with Scripture. Special revelation is not merely a supplement to natural law or human wisdom; it is the interpretive *lens* through which all other knowledge is rightly understood. In the realm of Christian counseling, this has significant implications. Too often, entire psychological systems have been embraced by well-meaning believers without any meaningful evaluation of their underlying metaphysical or moral assumptions. Techniques and theories are imported wholesale into Christian practice under the banner of "integration," but what is frequently missing is a serious examination of how these systems define human nature, purpose, and the problem of suffering—all of which are theological questions.

To adopt secular counseling paradigms without subjecting their foundations to the scrutiny of Scripture is, at best, a form of theological naïveté. At worst, it risks syncretism—blending biblical truth with secular worldviews in ways that distort or undermine the gospel. A *prima Scriptura* approach demands that we begin not with what seems to "work" according to empirical standards, but with what is true according to the word of God. This doesn't mean rejecting every insight from psychology, but it does mean that those insights must be reevaluated within a theological framework that begins with Christ, acknowledges the fallen nature of man, affirms the centrality of the cross and resurrection, and understands healing as a fundamentally redemptive, not merely therapeutic, process. In this way, the Christian counselor remains faithful both to the authority of Scripture and to the pastoral task of soul care that reflects the heart of

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[26] There are some who pit *prima Scriptura* against *sola Scriptura*, arguing that Scripture is the first among equals. I am explicitly rejecting that approach, presenting *prima Scriptura* as one aspect of *sola Scriptura*.

[27] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (The Aquinas Institute, 2012), 2.1.q90–q94. For a clear explanation of the role natural law plays in Roman Catholic theology, see John Paul II, Veritas Splendor, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html (accessed 08/08/25).

Christ.

Norma Scriptura: Scripture acts as the normative guide for our explorations. It provides the guard rails, the boundaries to our thinking. For the Christian counselor, the principle that Scripture is *norma normans non normata*—"the norming norm that is not itself normed"—provides a crucial theological foundation for engaging with the field of secular psychology.[28] This principle asserts that Scripture alone is the ultimate and final authority in matters of truth, meaning, and human flourishing. All other sources of knowledge, whether they come from tradition, reason, or scientific disciplines like psychology, are subordinate to the word of God and must be tested against it. For the counselor, this means that although secular psychology may offer valuable observations about human behavior, emotions, and cognition, it must never be accepted uncritically or allowed to function as equal authorities alongside Scripture.

This principle has immediate implications for how a Christian counselor employs secular methods into their practice. Sanctified critical thinking is necessary. Therapeutic models—whether cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, or person-centered—often emerge from worldviews that are at odds with biblical anthropology and theology. A counselor committed to Scripture as the *norming norm* must carefully evaluate these models in light of Scripture's teaching on human nature, sin, suffering, responsibility, and redemption. For instance, although cognitive-behavioral therapy may offer helpful tools for identifying distorted thought patterns, a biblical counselor must ask: Does this method honor the biblical categories of belief, repentance, and sanctification? If a theory minimizes moral responsibility or denies the reality of sin, it cannot be harmonized with a biblical view of the human person.

Because of general revelation and common grace, non-Christians will often discover important truths and principles that provide helpful insights. Some may say at this point that they do not contribute anything that was not already taught by Scripture. This objection misses the point that God often providentially uses nonbelievers to prod us to give attention to biblical themes that we heretofore overlooked or ignored.

The doctrine of *norma normans non normata* also reminds counselors that Scripture is not just authoritative but *sufficient*—it contains everything necessary for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3). This sufficiency does not mean Scripture is a textbook on every topic, but it does mean that it provides the ultimate interpretive framework for understanding all of life, including

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[28] For a helpful discussion of *norma Scriptura*, see Rhyne Putman, "Does an Affirmation of *Sola Scriptura* Entail the Regulative Principle of Worship?," *Journal of Baptist Theology and Ministry* 19.2 (2022): 235–39.

the psychological. In this light, the Christian counselor is called not to baptize secular methods but to filter them through the lens of Scripture, retaining what is consistent with God's truth and discarding what contradicts it. This protects the counselor from drifting into therapeutic philosophies that may be effective in technique but spiritually misleading or even harmful.

This approach does not call the Christian counselor to isolation from the broader disciplines of counseling and psychology. Rather, it calls for *discernment and theological vigilance*. Just as the Reformers valued tradition while submitting it to Scripture, so too can Christian counselors glean wisdom from psychology—as long as it is understood as a *norma normata*, a secondary source that must be continually evaluated and reshaped by the *norma normans* of God's word. In this way, the counselor remains faithful both to the truth of Scripture and to the complexities of human experience, ministering to others not merely with skillful techniques but with the hope and authority of God's redemptive Word.

Suprema Scriptura: Finally, in addition to *prima Scriptura* and *norma Scriptura*, evangelical theology also affirms *suprema Scriptura*—that *Scripture stands as the final judge* over all our theological reflections, practical methods, and ethical conclusions.[29] Even when we begin with the Bible and seek to remain faithful to it, our human limitations—both intellectual and moral—guarantee that our understanding will always be partial, and at times, deeply flawed. Because we are finite creatures with fallen minds, we are prone to error, bias, and self-deception. Therefore, Scripture is not only our starting point but also our *measuring stick*, our *corrective*, and our *final court of appeal*.

Suprema Scriptura reminds us that our best theological systems, counseling models, and pastoral practices are always *reformable*. They must continually be brought back to the text of Scripture for examination, refinement, and, when necessary, *repentance*. If it becomes clear that a belief, practice, or methodology—even one long cherished or broadly accepted—is out of step with biblical teaching, then it must be corrected or abandoned. The Bible is not a conversation partner among many; it is the sovereign voice of the living God to which every other voice must submit. This applies especially to the field of Christian counseling, where practitioners may adopt approaches that are effective in a clinical sense but at odds with biblical anthropology or morality. No amount of therapeutic success can justify a method that contradicts the revealed truth of Scripture.

This requires that the work of bringing our beliefs and practices into

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[29] For someone who emphasized *suprema Scriptura*, see James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Eerdmans, 1990), 1:180–82.

submission to Scripture *not be done in isolation*. God has placed us within the body of Christ, not merely for encouragement but also for *accountability*. Although Scripture alone is the final authority, God has ordained that the community of faith plays a critical role in speaking truth, exposing error, and helping us see where we may be blind. Especially in areas as complex and emotionally charged as counseling, it is dangerously easy to let personal experience or cultural pressure obscure biblical fidelity. Faithful brothers and sisters—pastors, theologians, counselors, and ordinary church members—must be empowered to speak from the word and help each other stay tethered to truth.

In this sense, *suprema Scriptura* is both a *doctrinal conviction* and a *communal discipline*. It teaches us that none of us are above correction, and all of us must be willing to place our ideas and practices under the judgment of God's word. Scripture is not merely the foundation we stand on, but the plumb line that checks our balance and the fire that tests our work. For Christian counselors, this means practicing their vocation with humility, openness to correction, and a commitment to reform whenever Scripture reveals the need. True biblical fidelity does not arise from isolation or mere sincerity, but from constant submission to the authority of the word—both personally and corporately.

These three Reformed principles—*prima Scriptura*, *norma Scriptura*, and *suprema Scriptura*—properly emphasize that the Bible must serve as our starting point, as our guide, and finally as our judge. All three emphases must be employed. In this way, the Bible is both formally and materially sufficient for Christian counseling.

Conclusion

I conclude that some within the Biblical Counseling movement have misunderstood the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture, particularly what is meant by material sufficiency. This misunderstanding—this misreading—is understandable. When Jay Adams raised the alarm in the 1970s, he addressed a very real problem. But the tendency to overcorrect is also real. The Bible alone is the ultimate and adequate authority for faith and practice, and under this authority the wise and discerning biblical counselor can use extra-biblical resources in the practice of counseling.