
Biblical Counseling and Our Sufficiency in Christ

by John MacArthur

There is a subtle but persuasive strategy unfolding today among those who call themselves evangelical Christians. It is an attempt to deny the role of Scripture as the only source for spiritual truth. The church seems to have bought into the notion that God's Word doesn't really contain all we need to know to be effective in ministry. Many pastors and church leaders are turning to other sources to find "deeper" truth than they suppose Scripture contains.

But before analyzing these other sources, let me pose a basic question. What does the Bible tell us about itself? What does the Word say that the Word contains? What does Scripture teach about the sufficiency and scope of Scripture?

Psalm 19 and the Sufficiency of Scripture

No passage in all the Old Testament deals with biblical sufficiency as succinctly as Psalm 19. Psalm 119 covers the subject in greater depth, but to cover that Psalm thoroughly would require space beyond the limits of this brief article. In Psalm 19:7-14 we get a brief, potent statement of the utter sufficiency of God's Word. In my view this passage is definitive in showing why other sources are unnecessary for and incompatible with biblical counseling.

The theme of the Psalm is the revelation of God. The first six verses deal with *natural revelation*, God's revelation of Himself as seen in creation. Verses 7 to 9 describe *special revelation*, God's revelation of Himself in His Word. It is these verses we want to consider most carefully:

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.

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First of all, note the structure of the passage.

- There are six statements. Each contains three elements: a title for the Lord's Word, a characteristic that describes the Lord's Word, and a benefit produced by the Lord's Word.
- There are six titles for Scripture. It is spoken of as *law, testimony, precepts, commandment, fear* and *judgments*. Each title communicates a different aspect of Scripture.
- There are six characteristics of Scripture. The Word of God is *perfect*, it is *sure*, it is *right*, it is *clear*, it is *clean*, it is *true*.
- There are six benefits of Scripture. It *restores the soul*, it *makes wise the simple*, it *rejoices the heart*, it *enlightens the eyes*, it *endures forever*, and it is *righteous altogether*.
- There are six occurrences of the covenant name of YHWH, translated in the phrase "of the Lord." And thus six times we are reminded that the source of special revelation is God Himself.

These verses show the utter comprehensiveness of biblical sufficiency. Here is God's own witness and testimony to the total adequacy of His Word for all spiritual needs. Look one at a time at these six statements and note the sweeping claim God makes about the utter sufficiency of His Word to teach us how to live.

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul. The first title for Scripture in these verses is "law," or *torah*, a favorite biblical word for Scripture. It identifies the Scriptures as divine instruction. It refers to the fact that Scripture is God teaching truth to humanity. It has in view divine instruction relative to creed and character and conduct. It pictures Scripture as a complete manual laying out God's law for our lives. In other words, the Bible is the law of the Lord for human living. As such, it is "perfect." Here the psalmist is setting Scripture in contrast to the imperfect, flawed reasonings and instructions of men.

I once spent an afternoon looking up the Hebrew word translated "perfect" in my lexicons and following it through all the Old Testament to try to get a feeling for what it really meant. After several hours I came to the conclusion that what this word really means is "perfect"! It speaks of perfection in every sense of the word—not merely something that is perfect as opposed to imperfect but also something that is perfect as opposed to incomplete. The word could also accurately be translated "comprehensive." It speaks of something so complete as to cover comprehensively all aspects of a matter. In other words the Word of God lacks nothing. It is flawless, comprehensive and completely sufficient.

The law of the Lord—this divine instruction which is utterly comprehensive—has the effect of restoring, con-

verting, reviving and refreshing the soul. Each of those is an apt translation of that Hebrew verb. "Soul" here is the Hebrew word *nephesh*, a Hebrew noun familiar to any Old Testament student. *Nephesh* is translated with at least twenty-one English words throughout the Old Testament: "life," "person," "self" and "heart" are some samples. It speaks of the inner person.

Here, then, is the sense of this first statement: Scripture, which is divine instruction, is so comprehensive that it can totally transform the inner person. That is a monumental claim. It means Scripture is utterly sufficient for conversion, transformation, and restoration, for both spiritual birth and growth to perfection. The statement is made without any equivocation, without any caveats.

The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The word "testimony" in this phrase speaks of Scripture as divine witness. It is God's own witness to Himself. It is His personal testimony about Who He is. And it is "sure" meaning it is unmistakable, trustworthy, unwavering, reliable. Scripture is more certain than anything else. It provides a foundation that will not move on which a person may build a life and an eternal destiny without hesitation. And this sure Word, this sure testimony from God about Himself, makes simple people wise.

The Hebrew word translated "simple" in this verse comes from a root that describes an open door. The Old Testament saints viewed a simple-minded person as having an open door in the intellect. Did you ever hear somebody say, "I'm open-minded"? An Old Testament Jew would say, "Close it!" In their way of thinking a simpleton was someone who was literally open-minded—unable to keep anything in or out. The same Hebrew term is used often in the Proverbs to identify the naive person, the undiscerning, non-discriminating, inexperienced, and uninformed fool. According to the psalmist, then, Scripture—the sure, reliable, trustworthy, unwavering testimony from God about Himself—comes to the one who is simple and makes him wise.

Note carefully: the wisdom spoken of here is not intellectual data to be stored in the brain. The Hebrew concept of wisdom has more to do with the way one lives. In the Old Testament wisdom is defined as the ability to make right choices in daily conduct; to live on earth with a heavenly understanding. The word "wise" really means "skilled in all aspects of holy living." The biggest fool of all is the one who knows the truth but doesn't live according to it.

Thus this couplet means that Scripture is so sure and reliable and trustworthy and unwavering that it takes the simple-minded, undiscerning, uninformed, ignorant person and makes him skilled in all aspects of holy

living. Therein is the sanctifying power of the Word.

The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. This third statement about Scripture speaks of God's Word as divine principles. In other words, the Word of God is a divine set of guidelines for living. And these principles are "right." The intent of the Hebrew word here is the idea that God's precepts lay out a right path. We're not left to wander around in a fog of human opinion. We have a true Word that lays out a true path that can be followed. And what is the product of that?: "rejoicing the heart." The life of true joy comes from walking according to divine principles. People who go the way of the world, away from the Word, find no joy. Those who live according to the path outlined in Scripture find complete and full joy.

And so this phrase says that God's Word lays down right principles that make a sure path on which all who walk will find fullness of joy. You can begin to see how these descriptions of Scripture dovetail, answering every need of the human heart.

The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The word "commandment" in this phrase pictures Scripture as the divine mandate. That is to say the Word of God is authoritative, binding, and non-optional. The Bible is not a book of suggestions from God. It contains divine commands, non-negotiables. These demands, the psalmist says, are "pure," meaning, simply, "clear." The divine commandments are lucid, easy to see, giving clear direction. And the point is that Scripture enlightens our eyes to the dark things in life.

New Christians who have lived many years in darkness will understand the import of this phrase. You have probably noticed that whenever relatively new Christians speak of the change wrought in their lives, they frequently underscore this truth. When a person is born again, many dark things become clear. That's because the Word of God enlightens the eyes. So much becomes clear. The confusing things of life become understandable.

And so the Word of God is sufficient for salvation, total transformation of the inner person, the source of skill in all matters of holy living, the path to joy, and the source of a clear understanding of things.

The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The noun used here is "fear," but because of the parallelism, we know it refers to Scripture. Why is Scripture spoken of as fear? Because the Bible is the manual on worship. It teaches us how to fear God, how to reverence Him. Since the habit of the human soul is to worship, we need instruction about Whom to worship and how to worship Him properly.

As a manual on worship, the Bible is "clean"—without evil, without corruption, and without error.

The Hebrew word is *tahor*, meaning “without impurity, defilement, filthiness, or imperfection.” The psalmist is saying that Scripture is unsullied by sin. A parallel verse is Psalm 12:6: “The words of the Lord are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times.” There’s no impurity in it. It is hallowed, it is holy. It is separated from sin.

The point is that the Word of God will lead us into purity. You will never find in Scripture any misrepresentation of God, man, Satan, angels, or demons. You will never find any misstatement of what is right or wrong. Everything here is absolutely clean and unsullied. Here is a perfect resource for us.

And note that this fear of the Lord endures forever. It is permanently and eternally relevant. It doesn’t need updating. It doesn’t need editing. It doesn’t need to be polished or refined. Any person living at any time in human history in any culture in any climate will find the Bible completely applicable. The same basic principles of the Word of God apply equally to a myriad of different peoples and situations with the same powerful effect.

The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. The word “judgments” looks at Scripture as divine verdicts. This phrase views God as the judge of all the earth and Scripture as His pronouncements from the divine bench. These judgments, according to the psalmist, are true. There is a wealth of import in that simple adjective.

Where do we go to find salvation? Where do we go to find the skill of living in daily life? Where do we go to find an overcoming joy through all the trials of life? Where do we go to get light on the dark things of life? Where do we go for a permanent resource that never changes? Where do we go for truth?

There’s only one answer: God’s Word, the Bible. Nowhere else can we find that which can totally transform the whole person, make him wise, bring him joy, enlighten his eyes, be permanently relevant, and produce comprehensive righteousness.

Is it any wonder verse 10 says what it says? “They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.” Is there anything as sweet? Is there anything as precious?

Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults. Also keep back Thy servant from presumptuous sins; let them not rule over me; then I shall be blameless, and I shall be acquitted of great transgression. (verses 11–13)

Here the psalmist sums up what God is saying to us about His Word: Scripture is our greatest possession, more precious than gold. It is the greatest pleasure, sweeter than honey. It is the greatest protection, warning us from error. It offers the greatest promise, of an eternal reward. It is the greatest purifier, keeping us from sin. And so in verse 14 his response is predictable: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.”

The psalmist seems to have in mind Joshua 1:8: “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.” What kind of meditation and what kind of words are acceptable? Scripture, according to Joshua 1:8. It is the only resource that is all-sufficient, guaranteeing success to the one whose mind is fixed and meditating on its immense richness. Psalm 1:1–3 echoes the same thought:

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

Those passages utterly preclude the possibility that the people of God may find essential spiritual truth in any other resource besides God’s Word. They are not isolated proof texts, but repeat a theme that saturates Scripture.

Second Timothy 3:16 must settle the question of biblical sufficiency for the Christian. These verses are often thought of as an affirmation of inspiration, and they certainly are that. But notice how clearly and definitively they affirm the sufficiency of Scripture as well: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; *that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work*” (emphasis added).

There is no spiritual need that is not met in Scripture. There is no necessary resource that is not supplied there. No right teaching, reproof, correction, or training with regard to spiritual matters is possible apart from the all-sufficient Word of God. Let’s not let that great reality be swept away by the fads and clamoring of an ungodly age.

The Clamor of Voices

Look at how subtly Christians' confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture can be undermined.

One pastor told me he was planning to restructure his entire church according to some principles he has gleaned from the latest trends in secular business management. He believes modern students of management theory have discovered some tremendous new insights that will revolutionize his church.

Actually, he is several years behind most church growth experts, who now declare that churches must emulate the entertainment industry if they are to remain relevant. Churches are following the counsel of these "experts" with alarming eagerness. A pastor friend excitedly told me his church recently added a production director, a lighting coordinator, and a choreographer to the pastoral staff. He is convinced churches that do not stay abreast of the fashions of popular culture cannot possibly have effective long-term ministries.

Other problems aside, notice the subtle way these philosophies undermine the role of Scripture as the only and all-sufficient source of spiritual truth for Christian ministry. It is no longer deemed sufficient for a pastor to know and teach and implement God's Word. Pastors are expected to study management philosophy and show-business. Who knows what the trends of the future will be? It seems the time is coming when pastors will be sought for expertise in corporate administration, market analysis, advertising skill, and ability to decipher and anticipate demographic trends. Already many seminaries are focusing on training ministerial candidates in those very subjects.

Unfortunately, this tendency to undervalue Scripture and turn instead to secular expertise on spiritual matters has been particularly effective in the area of counseling. For many years, conservative, Bible-believing Christians have been besieged by forces within the church eager to establish psychology as superior to Scripture for dealing with behavioral and emotional problems. Advocates of "Christian psychology" have been successful in convincing many—perhaps it is even accurate to say most—Christians that psychotherapy offers solutions not available to those who seek answers to emotional and spiritual problems through Scripture alone. An appalling number of Christians believe that biblical counseling is shallow, perhaps even dangerous. They have evidently bought the claim that psychology offers deeper, more up-to-date knowledge than Scripture.

The influence of such thinking on the church over the past few decades has been remarkable. Once viewed as a crucial part of church life and ministry, counseling is now handled in clinics by professionals. These clinics

generate fees amounting annually to billions of dollars. Lay Christians, on the other hand, have been taught to think of themselves as incompetent to counsel. Even pastors seem intimidated by the psychotherapy movement. Many have simply handed over to professionals this vital pastoral responsibility.

Many evangelicals view psychotherapy with an awe that approaches reverence. Ironically, while the church is embracing psychotherapy more fervently than ever, many secular psychologists and psychiatrists are raising serious questions about the validity of their own basic presuppositions. In my book *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, I quoted several secular news reports chronicling the decline of psychotherapy.¹ I cited a conference held in Phoenix in 1985 billed as the largest gathering of psychotherapists ever assembled. Several participants in that conference—well-known leaders in secular behavioral studies—essentially admitted that there was very little science and a lot of guesswork, charlatanry, and quackery in their profession.² A *Time* magazine article on the state of psychotherapy said, "Psychiatrists themselves acknowledge that their profession often smacks of modern alchemy—full of jargon, obfuscation and mystification, but precious little real knowledge."³

The sad truth is "Christian" psychology offers nothing distinctively Christian. Though it is often called "Christian," or even "biblical," the psychology that has taken evangelicalism by storm is nothing more than Freudianism disguised with spiritual imagery or repackaged with sprinklings of Christian terminology.⁴ A couple of Christian psychologists were honest enough to admit, "At the present time there is no acceptable Christian psychology that is markedly different from non-Christian psychology. It is difficult to imply that we function in a manner that is fundamentally distinct from our non-Christian colleagues."⁵ To those who understand the roots of psychology—and the sufficiency of the Bible's alternative—that is frankly frightening.

Psychology grew out of atheistic and evolutionary presuppositions. Whatever is effective in psychothera-

¹ *Our Sufficiency in Christ* (Dallas: Word, 1991), pages 62–66.

² *Ibid.*, 64–66.

³ *Time*, "Psychiatry on the Couch." 2 April 1979, page 74.

⁴ "Nearly all recent counseling books for ministers, even conservative ones, are written from the Freudian perspective in the sense that they rest largely upon the presuppositions of the Freudian ethic of non-responsibility" from Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1970), pages 17–18.

⁵ Sutherland, P. and Poelstra, P., "Aspects of Integration," paper presented at the meeting of the Western Association of Christians for Psychological Studies, Santa Barbara, California, June, 1976. Cited by Martin and Deidre Bobgan, *PsychoHeresy* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: EastGate, 1987), page 5.

peutic technique is limited to a very superficial, temporal level. Far from being life-transforming divine truth, there is not even a unified system that can be stated in principles on which all psychologists will agree. Psychotherapy as practiced today—even in the church—is a mass of confused and often contradictory human ideas. Clearly, as a system, psychology cannot be successfully integrated with Christian truth.

A recent book, titled *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional*, by Wendy Kaminer, debunks much of the mystique of modern psychology.⁶ The author does not purport to be a Christian. She describes herself as “a skeptical, secular humanist, Jewish, feminist, intellectual lawyer.”⁷ Yet she writes as a bitter critic of the marriage of religion and psychology. She notes that religion and psychology have always more or less deemed one another incompatible. Now she sees “not just a truce but a remarkable accommodation.”⁸ Even from her perspective as an unbeliever she can see that this accommodation has meant a change in the fundamental message. She writes:

Religious writers would minimize or dismiss the effect of psychology on religion, fiercely denying that it has made doctrinal changes, but it does seem to have influenced the tone and packaging of religious appeals.... Christian codependency books, like those produced by the Minirth-Meier clinic in Texas, are practically indistinguishable from codependency books published by secular writers. ... Religious writers justify their reliance on psychology by praising it for “catching up” to some eternal truths, but they’ve also found a way to make the temporal truths of psychology palatable. Religious leaders once condemned psychoanalysis for its moral neutrality.... Now popular religious literature equates illness with sin.⁹

Some of the other criticism Kaminer levels against evangelicals is unwarranted or misguided, but in this respect she is right on target: the inevitable result of Christians embracing secular psychology has been the abandonment of any coherent concept of sin. And that has inevitably clouded the message we proclaim.

Kaminer writes:

No matter how bad you’ve been in the narcissistic 1970’s and the acquisitive 1980’s, no matter how many drugs you’ve ingested, or sex acts performed, or how much corruption

enjoyed, you’re still essentially innocent: the divine child inside you is always untouched by the worst of your sins.¹⁰

Elsewhere, she says,

Inner children are always good—innocent and pure—like the most sentimentalized Dickens characters, which means that people are essentially good.... Evil is merely a mask—a dysfunction.

The therapeutic view of evil as sickness, not sin, is strong in co-dependency theory—it’s not a fire and brimstone theology. “Shaming” children, calling them bad, is considered a primary form of abuse. Both guilt and shame “are not useful as a way of life,” Melody Beattie writes earnestly in *Codependent No More*. “Guilt makes everything harder.... We need to forgive ourselves” (New York: Harper & Row, 1989, pages 114–115). Someone should remind Beattie that there’s a name for people who lack guilt and shame: sociopaths. We ought to be grateful if guilt makes things like murder and moral corruption “harder.”¹¹

She is correct in suggesting that evangelicalism has been infiltrated by a new kind of anthropology-psychology-theology that denies the reality of sin.

This is a serious matter. Whether you deny sin overtly and totally, or covertly and by implication, any tampering with the biblical concept of sin makes chaos of the Christian faith. And that is precisely what is happening at the heart of modern evangelicalism.

The Sufficiency of Our Spiritual Resources

We have to come back to the Word of God. Since Scripture itself claims to be sufficient, I suggest that those who say it is not are in serious error. The Word of God teaches that all Christians possess sufficient resources for genuine spiritual victory. Psychology is a counterfeit full of distortions and contradictions. Shouldn’t it be patently clear that modern psychology offers no spiritual benefit that the church lacks?

Paul sums up the matter of our spiritual sufficiency: “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but *our adequacy is from God*”¹² (emphasis added). The King James Version states, “Our sufficiency is of God.” Expanding on that great truth later on in the same epistle, Paul writes, “God is able to make all grace abound to you, that

⁶ Wendy Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1992).

⁷ *Ibid.*, page 121.

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 124.

⁹ *Ibid.*, page 124–125.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, page 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, page 18.

¹² II Corinthians 3:5.

always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed.”¹³ The “alls” and “everys” of that verse underscore the utter comprehensiveness of God’s provision. In other words, there is nothing for which you are not sufficient through the provision of God’s grace. If God is to glorify Himself through us, He must provide the necessary resources.

And He does. Peter wrote, “His divine power has granted to us *everything pertaining to life and godliness*, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.”¹⁴

Scripture not only tells you to embrace God’s resources; it also clearly warns you not to look beyond the resources God has so abundantly provided. Paul cautioned the Colossians:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete.¹⁵

In another epistle he added, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”¹⁶ What more does the Christian need? Certainly not the philosophizing and empty deception of spiritually destitute systems of psychology.

Many rich spiritual benefits belong to every believer—the fruit of the Spirit; the fellowship of other believers; the assurance of hope; and the eternal, abundant life Jesus promised. But all those realities are described for us and supplied to us through God’s Word. Settle the issue: the Scriptures are sufficient.

Jesus prayed for His disciples, “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth.”¹⁷ That is as clear and comprehensive a statement as any in all Scripture that sanctification in its fullest sense is accomplished by God’s Word.

Paul wrote that the Spirit of God revealed God’s truth to us not in the words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches. And because we have that Word of God through the Holy Spirit we can judge, appraise and evaluate *all things*. Why? For through the Scripture and the Spirit we have been given the mind of Christ.¹⁸

The writer of Hebrews said that the Scriptures reveal the deepest part of a person’s inner soul, for “The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Scripture cuts to the very depth of the deepest part of man’s being so that “all things are open and laid bare before Him with Whom we have to do.”¹⁹ In other words, the Word can do what no psychotherapy can do; it opens the soul. What the Spirit through the Word opens, the Spirit through the Word transforms:

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.
They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

¹⁹ Hebrews 4:12f.

¹³ II Corinthians 9:8.

¹⁴ II Peter 1:3, emphasis added.

¹⁵ Colossians 2:8–10.

¹⁶ Romans 8:32.

¹⁷ John 17:17.

¹⁸ I Corinthians 2:13–16.