

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

THE MISUNDERSTOOD PRINCIPLE OF *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

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INTRODUCTION

Has the concept of *Sola Scriptura* deviated away from the notion that was embraced by men like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox? Did they envision a concept that did not consider the scriptures in context of Christian historical teachings? Is the Bible open for any and all individualistic determinations about doctrine and are all such ideas as valid as the next? It would seem that the current contemporary definition of *sola scriptura* has diverged from the established concept of the founders of the Reformation. Yet there is a trend among modern Protestants who are struggling with this aged principle. According to Keith Mathison, many contemporary Fundamentalists and Protestants are coming to the conclusion that “*Sola Scriptura* was indefensible.”¹ He continues to describe a modern protestant understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle to be something of a burden for protestants to defend. The dire warnings that have been uttered since the birth of the Reformation by Roman Catholics have seemingly come to pass. Warnings of uncontrollable splinter groups all vying for supremacy and validity have been a part of the claims from those outside Protestantism. Consider this summary:

Historically, Protestants have understood the revelation of God in Christ to be the high point of that revelatory stream and thus the New Testament becomes a kind of linchpin in determining the sense of the rest of the scriptures. Unfortunately, this is where problems arise. If the Holy Spirit guides those who seek after God through the scriptures, why is it that there are approximately 30,000 denominations of Protestants in the United States alone, all maintaining that their interpretations of scripture are correct, and many differing so widely from each other that a visitor from outer space would wonder whose scriptures they were talking about? From the wildest fundamentalists to the most extreme radical textual critic, the understandings and positions they take are so dissimilar that one is required to ask: "Whose scriptures are we talking about?"²

¹ Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*. (Moscow: Canon, 2001)13.

² James Thomson, “*Sola Scriptura*” *The Presbyterian Record* 135, no.10 (2011): 17-18

Therefore, if such confusion was possible, what did the reformers believe was the correct path to navigate the new situation? Did they fully see this particular future in their minds? It would seem logical that they had a view of biblical interpretation that was more extensive than a simple definition of *sola scriptura*. Let us then consider four areas of discussion about this issue. First, we will delve into a brief history of the times and rise of *sola scriptura*. Secondly, consideration will be given to how the idea developed and who were the chief architects. Thirdly, many have claimed this principle is dangerous and appeal to history to validate their claims. Time will be spent observing how this concept has progressed through time. Fourthly, time will be given to seeking a balanced view of the original intent of this principle and understanding how it may differ from modern viewpoints.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OBSERVATION

While the normal conception is that *sola scriptura* was a development of the times of the Reformation, some have tried to bring the search for the origins back to patristic times. In regards to this, a comment from Dr. D.H. Williams who addressed the issue of seeking validation of an organized *sola scriptura* principle within the writings of the early church is offered here:

Is the principle *sola scriptura* historically tenable in the form in which it is usually defined so that the Bible is the only normative source for Christian faith and practice? Do the writings of the early church affirm this principle? As will become apparent, the very search for such a principle in the writings of the fathers is misguided in the light of the early church's understanding of apostolic authority. Even if one argues that a biblicism that approximates *sola scriptura* can be detected within the patristic age, it in no way guarantees a Christian doctrine of God or salvation.³

³ Daniel H. Williams, "The Search for *Sola Scriptura* in the early church" in *Interpretation* 52, no.4 (1998): 354-366

It can be therefore acceptable to contain the parameters of the origination to the formative years of the Reformation. In light of the importance of understanding our patristic forebears, it would be helpful to see how doctrinal truth was agreed upon. Instead of spending undue amounts of time, only a representative sample is offered. Daniel Williams quotes Tertullian in his work that is calling for modern protestants to reengage Christianity's foundations. In Tertullian's work, *On the Prescription of Heretics*, he is describing his stance on who he believes has the right to determine what scripture says.

We must not appeal to Scripture. . . one point should be decided first, namely, who holds the faith to which the Bible belongs, and from whom, through whom, when and to whom was the teaching delivered by which men became Christians? For only where the true Christian teaching and faith are evident, will the true Scriptures, the true interpretations, and all the true Christian traditions be found.⁴

In context, he is embroiled in fighting the Gnostic heretical claims. Notice his stance on who have historically been the recipients of the apostolic message. So it seems that there were other concerns that were important in the establishment and acceptance of biblical truth.

With this established, the fifteenth century conflict that led to the *sola scriptura* principle being developed was a long wandering away from the core of the Christian faith by the Roman Catholic Church. Although each major reformer had their own personal path that finally prompted them to make their stand, they all felt the call to correct a terrible wrong. While motives varied, they seemingly had goals they hoped to achieve. "Luther sought to cleanse it (Roman Catholic Church) from all that contradicted scripture. Zwingli went further, holding that only that which had a scriptural foundation should be believed and practiced."⁵

⁴ Daniel H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 91.

⁵ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2002) 67.

Yet at the core of the protest was the fact that so much of the tradition and manmade religious rules had fundamentally robbed Christianity of its apostolic connection. Reform was the cry and a call to return to a “pure, apostolic church” was conceived.⁶

In regards to the elements that created the environment for the Reformation to explode, the most influential was the opportunity to reintroduce the scriptures in their original languages, with the Greek texts being the most unique. Scholars like, Erasmus of Rotterdam, exposed the European people to the Greek scriptures, at the same time a fire of light began to stir in the hearts of countless Christians.⁷ This exposure did two things. First, it had shown light on verses of scripture that had long been twisted within the Latin Vulgate. Instances like Matthew 4:17 in the Vulgate taught the sacrament of penance, while the Greek text clearly taught the concept of heartfelt repentance.⁸ The second thing this exposure did was to offer a clearer picture of how un-biblical the Church had become. When information was provided, it brought the knowledge of truth. This experience changed everything and something had to be done!

THE “DANGEROUS IDEA”

At the time of the Reformation, the Roman Church held the power over what was acceptable Christian theology and doctrine. According to Alister McGrath, one of the great fears of the reformers was losing uniformity and seeing a rise in heretical teaching. He

⁶ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1985) 421.

⁷ Gonzales, pg.17

⁸ Alister McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007) 33.

explained the major questions were “Who has the authority to define its faith? Institutions or individuals? Who has the right to interpret its foundational document, the Bible?”⁹

Truthfully, this must have been unsettling for many. The reformers were thoughtful men, who took spiritual truth very seriously. Williams said, “The conflict between the early Reformers and Rome was not one of scripture versus Tradition, but rather a clash over what the traditions had become, or between divergent concepts of tradition. This is what Luther inherited as he developed his own views on the authority of scripture.”¹⁰ While traditional, historical development of scriptural doctrine was an identifiable part of what the reformers believed *Sola Scriptura* to mean. Yet it must be understood that the written revelation of God’s word was being placed on a higher pedestal compared to the position within Catholic structure. While there was certainly an element of struggle between scripture and tradition, Mathison gives a balanced view of what was really at issue during the reformation concerning the relations between scripture and tradition. He said, “what we find is a battle that cannot often be characterized accurately in terms of scripture vs. tradition. Instead what we find are competing concepts of the relationship between Scripture and tradition.”¹¹

In essence, the reformers were certainly not opposed to the use of tradition and its place in the history of the faith, they rendered it to be subservient to the dictates of Scripture. For many in the Church of Rome found this idea to be disastrous, it became an avenue of hope for real reform. Yet these fears are not totally unfounded and have even seemingly proven very real. Anyone with a Bible and a venue to dispense their ideas can claim biblical

⁹ McGrath, 3.

¹⁰ Daniel H. Williams, “*The Search for Sola Scriptura in the early church*” 3

¹¹ Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*. (Moscow: Canon, 2001) 20.

standing. For “all too easily heretical notions can arise under cover of a “back to the bible platform.”¹² Cutting the chord of authority from one centralized position was a moment that looked out into an unknown abyss. These general concerns are echoed by Williams who said, “This was the very outcome the 16th century Reformers were anxious to avoid. They were fully aware that the sola scriptura principle, however useful against Catholics, could also open a hermeneutical ‘Pandora’s box.’”¹³ Although they had witnessed the terrible and unbiblical stance of the Roman Church, they did not want to give rise to an idea where every believed what each thought in their own minds. The reformers did believe in doctrinal control and uniformity. But the door had been opened already by men such as John Wycliffe, who endeavored to place the scriptures into the language of the people. Luther did the same, when he began presenting his translation of the scriptures in German. Rome knew ignorance was their ally. Moynahan said, “the Church feared that translations would open its dogmas to question and challenge its spiritual dominion.”¹⁴ Challenge was exactly what happened! No matter the rules and alliances made, protestant, independent and Free Church movements have continued to thrive and shake loose any hold on their particular doctrinal concepts. With this movement in play, notice how the concept has changed over time.

A DEVELOPING IDEA

There were Christian groups who existed outside of Rome and free from its tradition and influence. These, who are numerous, existed through persecution and martyrdom. They benefited from the reformation, but they did not have the same history of others who came out

¹² Williams, “*The Search for Sola Scriptura in the early church*” 357.

¹³ *Ibid*, 357.

¹⁴ Brian Moynahan, *God’s Bestseller*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002) xii.

of the Roman Church. Their concept of tradition was more limited to their individual experience and founding. While the mainline founders of the reformation did not wish to totally expunge their religious experience of tradition and history, there were many who did not feel the same. The Waldensians, Mennonites and Anabaptists are three unique groups who have never embraced the concept of dealing with much Roman history of tradition.¹⁵

In the beginning of the twenty-first century in the United States, the majority of practicing Christians would come from a similar strain of independent thought. The old and historic have very particular meaning for this generation. They need only their Bible and the contemporary form of doctrinal answers which are easily to find and absorb. They see everything from a very superior perspective. This mindset has given rise to applying modern mentality and perspective to the events and decisions of the past. Many will evaluate the leaders of old and judge them harshly from a moral high ground. Yet sadly, it is perspective that has been neglected. The leaders of the reformation had major hurdles to climb, and terrible decisions to make. Their times and understanding were extremely different from modern day viewpoints. Yet somehow, it seems easy to step into their preverbal shoes and see their burdens and understand their decisions. But this is terribly flawed and not to be understood as honest consideration of a generation so far removed from this current time. The Protestant Reformers stood up to the power of the known world, a system unassailable, and conquered by purchasing it with untold amounts of blood and sacrifice.

In this regard, contemporary Christians have seen fit to reshape the concept of Sola Scriptura as it has developed within their own stream of evangelical or fundamental experience. The course of American Christianity and the surge of fundamentalism in the

¹⁵ Gonzales, pg.155

twentieth century have created a unique environment to foster the simplification and streamlining of doctrine and how one arrives at that destination. It is with this historically detached perspective that Williams expresses the limitations of a re-imagined Sola Scriptura.

“Contemporary proponents of sola scriptura insist that the interpretation of scripture must not be subjugated to any religious authority other than the Holy Spirit. Some have insisted on linking sola scriptura to the concept of biblical inerrancy. This heightens the contrast between the status of scripture as the sole revelation of God and that of ecclesial creeds, decrees, and councils, all of which are human foundations prone to error. Since scripture is regarded as the only sufficient source and norm for Christian faith, a sharp distinction is made from the purported "two-source" theory of revelation as taught by the council of Trent, which acknowledges both the authority of scripture and the church's authority expressed in its tradition and office. Thus, sola scriptura is meant to exclude any rival authority in the governing of Christian belief and devotion.”¹⁶

While this free concept of scriptural assessment seems to elevate the Holy Scriptures to their rightful place among Christian placement, truthfully it really only elevates teachers to have more freedom in sharing their individualized concepts and teachings. Referring back to Thompson’s statement of the number of separate denominations in the United States alone show that current Christians have very little connection to the historical development of the Faith for which they strive to propagate. Nevertheless, there seems to be a new move within Evangelical Christianity to develop closer ties to the past and the historic progress of their faith. In a world that has changed so rapidly many are reaching out for a more connected faith. Connected to life, but more importantly, connected back through the ages. So what are current Christians to do when it comes to seeking to deal with the pattern of doctrinal maturity and finding their place within this massive flow of Gospel experience? Are the concepts of the

¹⁶ Williams, “*The Search for Sola Scriptura in the early church*” 359.

reformers helpful for the non-reformed of our day? Is there something that we can glean and connect to?

A BALANCED PERSPECTIVE

Alister McGrath said that Scripture defines the “center of gravity of Evangelicalism.”¹⁷ The Scriptures must be given the proper place in matters of faith and practice, but never at the expense of learning how the scriptural river has ebbed and flowed down through the centuries. Dr. James White, in his book *Scripture Alone*, summarizes how the understanding of Sola Fide and Sola Scriptura can be better understood:

When we say that faith alone brings justification, we are not saying that faith should be considered in a vacuum, separated from everything else God does in the work of salvation. Instead, *sola fide* means that faith, apart from any concept of merit or works (actually in opposition thereto), is the sole means of justification. In the same way, *Scripture Alone* does not mean that God zoomed by planet earth, dropped off the Scriptures, and left us on our own. As we will note when we define *sola scriptura*, this is not a claim, for instance, that there is no church or that there is no Spirit. The title does not suggest that Scripture, apart from the Spirit, outside the church, is God’s only means of leading His people. It is, however, saying that Scripture is utterly unique in its nature as God-breathed revelation (nothing else is God-breathed) ; it is unparalleled and absolute in its authority; and it is the sole infallible rule of faith for the church.¹⁸

It is therefore an important element to this concept to perceive the Scriptures place as being prime, but not isolated from its own history and affects. The systemized theology that has been built over the past centuries can be relied upon if they can withstand the scrutiny of Christian past and theologians long since gone. This idea of re-inventing the faith, church, and worship has been on the rise for some time. Churches and church ministry is seeing a complete overhaul. The new leaders are advocating a plethora of changes and concepts that are seemingly completely new. The status of the Scriptures is quickly losing its place of

¹⁷ Williams, “*The Search for Sola Scriptura in the early church*” 354.

¹⁸ James R. White, *The Scripture Alone*. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004) 15.

authority and ever powerful veto power of faith and practice. Men such as Rob Bell have begun to reanimate old heresies such as Universalism.¹⁹ And redefine biblical concepts of marriage and morality like Brian McLaren, who has performed his own sons homosexual marriage.²⁰ Adding this massive shift in the evangelical landscape with this information age and it is of little wonder that so many are looking to return to a more connected Christian faith.

So instead of a reimagining of Christianity, Bible believing people should strive to seek to connect their faith and doctrines to the historic journey of its development. The sad story is that Protestantism has given birth to as much heresy and cults as the Roman Church ever put forth! History can be messy. Christian history is no different. The Apostle wrote of a “cloud of witnesses” who had gone on before, always standing forth as a challenge to continue and be faithful to the current generation of believers.²¹ In like manner, there have been faithful stewards of doctrine and theology who have deposited great thoughts and considerations concerning the Gospel and the entire body of God’s written word. These can help shape, structure and confirm our own spiritual journey. Though these writers words must be taken in context, and with grace, they can be extremely important. Although the task of journeying through the almost two-thousand year history of the Church is not the task for all believers, it should be for the serious Bible student who is called upon to teach and lead Christians in Truth.

¹⁹ Douglas A. Jacoby, *What’s the Truth about Heaven and Hell?* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2013) 103.

²⁰ Staff Writer, “Brian McLaren Leads Son’s Same-Sex Commitment Ceremony” Churchleaders.com <http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/163006-brian-mclaren-leads-son-s-same-sex-commitment-ceremony.html> (accessed March 5th, 2014)

²¹ Hebrews 12:1, King James Version

CONCLUSION

Has there been a divergence from the original conclusion of the reformers concerning the principle of *sola scriptura* in regards to as it is understood at present? The answer seems to be yes. The main cause seems to be from the natural reaction of recoiling away from anything that could potentially hinder the free expression of the Word of God. Williams states emphatically that we “have been taught to regard scripture and tradition as antithetical.”²² The strong stance in support for the Scriptures has probably clouded the usefulness of theological history and traditional scriptural concepts.

Michael Patton wrote, “We must interpret the Scriptures along with those who have gone before us, even if we might have warrant to question or disagree with their theology from time to time.”²³ It becomes very clear that the beginnings of Christian teachings on various subjects have gone through a lot of trial and error. Good theology takes time, consideration and critique to develop. Knowledge of the historical theological issues of our faith is helpful and even needful for a true balanced view of faith and practice. Because there is danger for those who try to open the scriptures and build a form of truth with only their own thoughts. Let us therefore, build upon the work and thoughts of those who have gone before us. And strengthen a solid balanced view of scriptural truth that is anchored by the amazing principle of “The Scriptures Alone”!

²² Williams, “*The Search for Sola Scriptura in the early church*” 360.

²³ C. Michael Patton, “*In Defense of Sola Scriptura*” Reclaiming the Mind Ministries. <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/content/Parchmentandpen/In-Defense-of-Sola-Scriptura.pdf> (accessed on March 2nd, 2014)

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