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Protestants and a Churchless Tradition: “Sola” vs. “Solo” Scriptura

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Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, by Anton von Werner, 1877

One of my ongoing fascinations is what I have come to refer to in my head as “the Evangelical appropriation of tradition.” Charismatics are celebrating Lent. Baptists are talking about the Eucharist. The inscrutable maybe-universalist and now Oprah-darling Rob Bell is even using the phrase *the tradition*. Maybe this tradition stuff isn’t so bad. I can branch out a little. I can line up some Athanasius next to my MacArthur, and a volume or two of Gregory of Nyssa next to my Bonhoeffer. Osteen still goes somewhere preferably near the bottom. (Who gave me that book, anyway?) Maybe we’ll put Origen down there with him. Both are questionable, right?. Oh, hey, I’ve heard Ratzinger is kind of interesting. And that “wounded healer” Nouwen guy’s onto something. Has anyone heard of someone named “Schmemmann”?

Welcome to the club, the Lutherans and certain Reformed types say. We’ve been waiting for you. Help yourself to some creeds. We hope you’ll stay for some liturgy.

And we hope you’ve discovered the difference between *sola* and *solo scriptura*.

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Solo scriptura, it is argued, is what most Evangelicals would probably understand as their basic matrix of church authority—the Bible is above everything. Some might say that the Bible is the *only* authority in church life, while others might say it is the *primary* authority in church life, but it's still over everything. What the Bible says trumps anything some teacher or cleric or council might say. They've all been wrong, but the Bible is always right.

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Hold on now, say the *sola scriptura* adherents. The Church has a place. The tradition has a place. They're not *above* the Bible, mind you, but they can inform how we read the Bible. The Church has to interpret the Bible, and the vast resources in Christian history can inform that interpretation. To summarize that position, let me quote a passage from a 2013 essay by Reformed Baptist writer Matthew Barrett ([“Sola Scriptura’ Radicalized and Abandoned”](#)):

I wish I could say that all evangelicals today have a crisp, accurate grasp of *sola scriptura*. I am hopeful that many understand how a Protestant view of Scripture and tradition differs from Rome's position. However, I am less confident that evangelicals understand the difference between *sola* and *solo scriptura*, for in some cases the latter is assumed to be the identity of the former.

Consequently, some evangelicals, intentionally or unintentionally, have followed in the footsteps of Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) who said, “I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me, and I am as much on my guard against reading them today, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever.”

Ironically, such a view cannot preserve *sola scriptura*. Sure, tradition is not being elevated to the level of Scripture. But the individual is! As Keith Mathison laments, in this view everything is “evaluated according to the final standard of the individual's opinion of what is and is not scriptural.” To be sure, such a view lends itself more in the direction of individual autonomy than scriptural accountability.

So how do we correct such a mistake? First, we must guard ourselves from an individualistic mindset that prides itself on what “I think” rather than listening to the past. In order to do so, we must acknowledge, as Mathison points out, that “Scripture alone” doesn't mean “me alone.”

Second, tradition is not a second infallible source of divine revelation alongside Scripture; nevertheless, where it is consistent with Scripture it can and does act as a ministerial authority. The historic creeds and confessions are a case in point.

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While the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Creed are not to be considered infallible sources divine revelation, nevertheless, their consistency with Scripture means that the church spoke authoritatively against heresy. Therefore, it should trouble us, to say the least, should we find ourselves disagreeing with orthodox creeds that have stood the test of time. Remember, innovation is often the first indication of heresy. Hence, as Timothy George explains, the reformers sought to tie their “Reformation exegesis to patristic tradition” in order to provide a “counterweight to the charge that the reformers were purveyors of novelty in religion,” though at the end of the day the fathers’ “writings should always be judged by the touchstone of Scripture, a standard the fathers themselves heartily approved.”

Abandoning solo *scriptura* does not require us to go to the other extreme, namely, elevating tradition to the level of Scripture. But it does require the humility to realize that we are always standing on the shoulders of those who came before us. For the reformers, the early church fathers were valuable (though not infallible) guides in biblical interpretation. In that light, we would be wise to listen to Luther this Reformation Day: “Now if anyone of the saintly fathers can show that his interpretation is based on Scripture, and if Scripture proves that this is the way it should be interpreted, then the interpretation is right. If this is not the case, I must not believe him” (LW 30:166; WA 14:31).

I’m overjoyed, of course, that Baptists, Lutherans, Calvinists and others should want to read the Church Fathers, sign onto the ancient creeds, and so forth. This is very good news, and I can only believe that it is likely they will thereby move closer to the faith that I hold as an Orthodox Christian.

At the same time, in reading this, even though it is certainly far more nuanced than the “no creed but the Bible” homespuns one usually finds in a Baptist church, I am nevertheless left with the sense that this “sola” vs. “solo” business is really a distinction without a difference.

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As someone who spent ten years as a theatrical stagehand, and now as a pastor of a not-large parish, whenever I read things like this, my first thought is to *logistics*—how will this work? What does it mean, practically speaking, to be a “sola scriptura” and not a “solo scriptura” Christian?

On the ground, even the “solo” types read Bible commentaries, listen to sermons on Sunday, and largely resemble their co-religionists when it comes to theological matters.

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That means that, even if they deny it *de jure*, the *de facto* reality is that they are at least subconsciously submitting themselves to interpretive authorities outside of themselves. There is an interpretive community at work even for the most isolated snake-handler in the hollers of West Virginia. That community probably consists of at least his pastor, probably his parents, other members of his church, his Sunday School teacher, some books and tracts he's picked up over the years, and maybe the preacher he listens to on the radio on Saturday nights.

He might believe in "no creed but the Bible," but he's still being influenced, whether he knows it or not.

Yet even with all those influences, he will still feel free to take his pastor aside and let him know about something he read in one of Paul's epistles that he thinks flatly contradicts what was said in the Sunday sermon. And he may even hold some beliefs that are different from everyone else's in his church. In fact, nearly everyone there has some ideas that aren't in synch with everyone else's. No one really minds, though. They're held together by a common inheritance of their particular kind of theology and spiritual life.

Enter the "sola" reformer who will bring these snake-handlers the good news of the "real" Reformation belief about the Bible.

Here, read this creed, he says. Doesn't it square with what the Bible says? Isn't this just the right way of reading the Bible? And how about this Basil fellow from the fourth century? Hasn't he got some interesting ideas about the Holy Spirit? What do you think about how that lines up with Pentecost in Acts? Seems okay, right?

He gets a few of these snake-handlers to break off and form the First Reformed Snake-Handling Bible Church of Pinch, West Virginia (yes, it's a real place), and they're now reciting the Nicene Creed, doing something that looks a little more liturgical on Sunday, and having Wednesday night Bible studies where names like "Augustine" and "Irenaeus" get floated occasionally.

That's not how it looks for most "sola" believers, though, some might say. Okay, but even for the stodgiest and most liturgical of Magisterial Reformation churches, I am going to assert that the basic dynamics are really the same. The only thing that is actually different is that the set of influences on the individual believer now includes more historical documents.

Is this *better* than chucking every Bible commentary that's more than thirty years old and clutching to the death my last copy of *The Late, Great Planet Earth*?

Yes, of course.

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Is it a fundamentally different kind of authority in the spiritual life, though?

No, it is not.

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Supposedly, the difference here is *humility*, i.e., that the “sola” approach is not individualistic. As Barrett puts it, “we must guard ourselves from an individualistic mindset that prides itself on what ‘I think’ rather than listening to the past. In order to do so, we must acknowledge, as Mathison points out, that ‘Scripture alone’ doesn’t mean ‘me alone.’”

Great, but what does it mean to “listen” to the past? Does it mean that I have to submit my mind to the interpretations of St. Ignatius of Antioch on the reality of the Eucharist? Or if, when I read John 6, I still come away with Zwinglian memorialism, I decide that Ignatius is wrong and “the Bible” is right? Some would say yes, but isn’t that really just what “I think” versus what Ignatius thinks?

After all, if tradition is not to be elevated “above” Scripture, then that means that Scripture always trumps tradition, right? But how do I find out what Scripture says? By reading it, right? But what happens if my reading of Scripture doesn’t agree with someone else’s? Why, when I read John 6, is my interpretation correct, while others who read that same passage get it wrong?

Is it because I am smart enough, sincere enough, and well-read enough, and they are lacking in one or more of those three categories? Will everyone who is intelligent, honest and well-informed all read the Bible in exactly the same way?

You see? The problem is still there. Saying Scripture is “above” tradition is really saying “my reading of Scripture is above tradition.” But the problem is still not solved as to why, when I read the Scripture, I get it right, while all those readers functioning in “the tradition” are getting it wrong. Or perhaps some of them are right, while others are wrong. Surely the right ones are smart, sincere and well-read. And the wrong ones... they’re just not.

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Okay, it doesn’t have to be that way. The Church is there to help. The Church will interpret the Bible together. I don’t have to go it alone.

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But what if my church is wrong? What about when my church interprets it in a manner that contradicts the Methodists down the block? Who's right? Just read the Scripture? But that's what I've been doing!

What is missing here is *ecclesiology*.

Those attempting to derive the perfect method for interpreting the Scripture (or, at least, perfect enough to get all the really essential stuff in order) are missing things the Scripture itself says about the Church and about tradition, too.

I'll spare you all the detail, but I'll at least point out that the Scripture calls the Church "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15) and that we should "stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thess. 2:15). And everything that happens in that great mission of the Apostles is finally churchly, finally ecclesial. What they found is not a series of Bible studies and schools of interpretive method, but churches, real Eucharistic communities who continued to function for centuries before the New Testament finally coalesced into what we now have.

And they kept functioning the same way even after that happened. The idea that the Scripture they'd produced was now "above" the tradition that had produced it would not have made any sense to them. Were they supposed to go back and revise all the things they'd been doing for centuries now that the Bible was around, even though when they put the Bible together, none of it contradicted what they had been doing?

Keith Mathison (the author of this "sola/solo" distinction) [asserts](#) correct interpretation is according to the "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*) that has been in place for 2,000 years. But where exactly is that to be found? What defines it?

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In the end, the arbiter is still the individual. Mathison reaches towards ecclesiology in his arguments, but falls short when he claims that traditional ecclesiology makes the Church "autonomous" apart from God. God inspires the Scripture but not the Church, it seems. But who will interpret the Scriptures correctly? Who will correct the Church?

One can say that the Church has authority to interpret Scripture, but *which Church*? Is it all of them? What about the fact that they don't all agree? And no, they don't even all agree on essentials. "Which Church?" is a critical question, and it's one that isn't being asked very much in these discussions. Still further, "What is the Church?" is also just as critical, and I fear it's also gotten lost somewhere. The second question finally leads to the

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first. If you can figure out what the Church is, then you will realize that not all “churches” are the Church.

If not all churches are the Church, then that means there’s got to be one that is that One. The Bible talks about only one.

In the end, the “sola” method is really the same as the “solo” one. It’s still fallible people claiming to read an infallible document and deriving their authority from their reading. That reading is still “above” church and tradition. The only difference between this and the “solo” approach is that the “solos” see it as so far above that they needn’t pay those things much, if any, mind. A “sola” reader might pay far more attention to history, but he is still its master, not its servant. He doesn’t have to put himself in obedience to any of those people.

So the “sola” reads Athanasius and Origen, while the “solo” reads Swindoll and Lewis, and both are free to put those books all back on the shelf when they think they contradict Scripture. In the end, it’s still the individual by himself, judging all these things for himself. How else could it be otherwise?

Part of the problem here is that the main lens through which most Protestants view questions of tradition and ecclesiology is marked with their image of Roman Catholicism. It is seen as a top-heavy, controlling magisterium who demand obedience and have an infallible papacy at their center. And that infallible papacy draws his pronouncements from two separate sources, Scripture and Tradition, and we suspect that he’s making up some stuff of his own to stick into the “Tradition” side that will suit him.

That is a caricature, of course, but even the more honest version is not the way these things work in the Orthodox Church. For the Orthodox, we have no single infallible, authoritative interpreter of Scripture. (Protestants rightly protest this, but they finally each make themselves into their own infallible interpreters. Saying “I could be wrong” or “I’m standing on the shoulders of giants” doesn’t really help. You’re still in charge.)

We also do not regard Holy Tradition as a separate source of authority. Indeed, none of these things are “sources” at all. Rather, the Scriptures are at the center of Tradition and inseparable from it. Holy Tradition produced the Scriptures and is the proper context for their interpretation. For us, Scripture is not “over” Tradition nor “with” it, but rather, Scripture is *within* Tradition. Far from lessening its authority, this is the Scripture properly enthroned within its natural sphere of influence. A king outside his court is subject to all kinds of dangers, but within it, he is at home and everything is sensitive to him. Holy Tradition is the natural home of Holy Scripture.

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And Holy Tradition is not simply anything one might find lurking somewhere in Christian history. (This, I think, is what Rob Bell means when he speaks of “the tradition”: “Oh, I found this somewhere in an old book.”) Rather, it is the living reality of Christ in His Church, vivifying the Church by the Holy Spirit. No new dogmas are revealed, because everything was revealed in Christ. There is an ongoing revelation, but it is a revelation of the same things, the same God Who wishes to be known by every person. That is why not everything ever said by every Christian writer is really part of Holy Tradition. Some got some things wrong, but it was not individual believers reading their Bibles who knew better and then corrected them. It was *the Church*, acting according to the apostolic succession given “to bind and to loose,” which sifted out what really represented the tradition and what didn’t.

Someone’s always got to “bind and loose.” Will it be people who were ordained by those ordained by those ordained by the Apostles (and so on), or will it just be me and my Bible? Or just me and my church community, founded by some fellow who settled here just a few decades back? Do you get the authority to “bind and loose” just by claiming it?

R.C. Sproul had this to say about his view of Christian tradition:

Although tradition does not rule our interpretation, it does guide it. If upon reading a particular passage you have come up with an interpretation that has escaped the notice of every other Christian for two-thousand years, or has been championed by universally recognized heretics, chances are pretty good that you had better abandon your interpretation. (*The Agony of Deceit*, p. 34-35)

But who will make you abandon it? Does anyone have the authority to do that? And what if you disagree about whether those heretics are “universally recognized” or whether an interpretation has really “escaped the notice of every other Christian for two-thousand years”?

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This is finally the problem with Protestants laying claim to elements of Christian tradition while still retaining *sola scriptura*—it all becomes just “texts,” resources that can be called on or discarded as the individual sees fit for himself. I like it when Basil speaks highly of Scripture but not when Ignatius speaks highly of the bishop. I like it when Athanasius insists on the *homoousios* but not all that “man becomes god” stuff. I like Chrysostom’s commentaries on Scripture but not Cyprian’s insistence that you cannot have God for your Father without the Church for your mother.

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They still just get to decide for themselves what they will listen to and what they won't. "Sola" as distinct from "solo" *scriptura* is really just a better-read version of the same thing.

I love that some Protestants are getting in touch with Christian history. But they shouldn't fool themselves into thinking that they're being faithful to that legacy if they do not pay heed to so much of it. And of course one cannot be faithful to everything in Christian history—there are heretics and dragons lurking there, after all. But if navigating those waters in a craft I designed and built myself is unlikely to bring me to a safe harbor, then getting together with my neighbors to build it after we read some old books together is no guarantee, either.

My hope is that those who choose to sail those waters will come bumping up to the Ark of Salvation, which is the Church. There are lots of life preservers and rescue teams ready to help.

But I really am glad some of them are sailing. Really glad. This is *very* good news.

Suggested further reading:

- [Contra Sola Scriptura](#), by O&H author Robert Arakaki (Orthodox).
- [Solo Scriptura, Sola Scriptura, and the Question of Interpretive Authority](#), by Bryan Cross and Neal Judisch (Roman Catholic)
- [Sola or Solo Scriptura? \(And Other Questions That Don't Make Grammatical Sense\)](#), by Fr. Jonathan A. Mitchican (Anglican) (NB: His one mention of the Orthodox gets us wrong—not everything in every conciliar canon is considered Holy Tradition, and we absolutely do not regard these things as “addendums to God’s Word.”)
- [Solo Scriptura, Sola Scriptura, and Apostolic Succession: A Response to Bryan Cross and Neal Judisch](#), by Keith Mathison (Reformed) (This is a response to the Catholic piece above. I find it unconvincing, but it’s worth noting, anyway.)

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About [Fr. Andrew Stephen Damick](#)



The Very Rev. Archpriest [Andrew Stephen Damick](#) is Chief Content Officer of [Ancient Faith Ministries](#), former pastor (2009-2020) of [St. Paul Antiochian Orthodox Church](#) of Emmaus, Pennsylvania, and author of *Arise, O God, Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, *Bearing God* and *An Introduction to God*. He is also host of the [Orthodox Engagement](#), [Amon Sûl](#), [Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy](#) and [Roads from Emmaus](#) podcasts on Ancient Faith Radio, co-host with Fr. Stephen De Young of [The Lord of Spirits](#) podcast, co-host with Michael Landsman of [The Areopagus](#) podcast, and he is a frequent speaker at lectures and retreats both in parishes and in other settings. You can follow him on [Facebook](#), [Telegram](#) and [Instagram](#).

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