

Solo Scriptura

The Difference a Vowel Makes

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Modern Reformation 16/2 (March/April 2007), pp. 25-29.

The twentieth century could, with some accuracy, be called a century of theological anarchy. Liberals and sectarians have long rejected outright many of the fundamental tenets of Christian orthodoxy. But more recently professing evangelical scholars have advocated revisionary versions of numerous doctrines. A revisionary doctrine of God has been advocated by proponents of “openness theology.” A revisionary doctrine of eschatology has been advocated by proponents of full-preterism. Revisionary doctrines of justification *sola fide* have been advocated by proponents of various “new perspectives” on Paul. Often the revisionists will claim to be restating a more classical view. Critics, however, have usually been quick to point out that the revisions are actually distortions.

Ironically, a similarly revisionist doctrine of *sola Scriptura* has arisen within Protestantism, but unlike the revisionist doctrine of *sola fide*, the revisionist doctrine of *sola Scriptura* has caused very little controversy among the heirs of the Reformation. One of the reasons there has been much less controversy over the revisionist doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is that this doctrine has been gradually supplanting the Reformation doctrine for centuries. In fact, in many segments of the evangelical world, the revisionist doctrine is by far the predominant view now. Many claim that this revisionist doctrine is the Reformation doctrine. However, like the revisionist doctrines of *sola fide*, the revisionist doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is actually a distortion of the Reformation doctrine.

The adoption of the revisionist doctrine of *sola Scriptura* has resulted in numerous biblical, theological, and practical problems within Protestant churches. These problems have become the center of attention in recent years as numerous Protestants have converted to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy claiming that their conversion was due in large part to their determination that the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* was indefensible. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox apologists have been quick to take advantage of the situation, publishing numerous books and articles devoted to critiquing the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. One issue, however, that neither the converts nor the apologists seem to understand is that the doctrine they are critiquing and rejecting is the *revisionist* doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, not the classical Reformation doctrine. In order to understand the difference, some historical context is necessary.

Historical Observations

Part of the difficulty in understanding the Reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura is due to the fact that the historical debate is often framed simplistically in terms of “Scripture versus tradition.” Protestants are said to teach “Scripture alone,” while Roman Catholics are said to teach “Scripture plus tradition.” This, however, is not an accurate picture of the historical reality. The debate should actually be understood in terms of competing concepts of the relationship between Scripture and tradition, and there are more than two such concepts in the history of the church. In order to understand the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura* we must understand the historical context more accurately.

The Reformation debate over *sola Scriptura* did not occur in a vacuum. It was the continuation of a long-standing medieval debate over the relationship between Scripture and tradition and over the meaning of “tradition” itself. In the first three to four centuries of the church, the church fathers had taught a fairly consistent view of authority. The sole source of divine revelation and the authoritative doctrinal norm was understood to be the Old Testament together with the Apostolic doctrine, which itself had been put into writing in the New Testament. The Scripture was to be interpreted in and by the church within the context of the *regula fidei* (“rule of faith”), yet neither the church nor the *regula fidei* were considered second supplementary sources of revelation. The church was the interpreter of the divine revelation in Scripture, and the *regula fidei* was the hermeneutical context, but only Scripture was the Word of God. Heiko Oberman (1930-2001) has termed this one-source concept of revelation “Tradition 1.”

The first hints of a two-source concept of tradition, a concept in which tradition is understood to be a second source of revelation that supplements biblical revelation, appeared in the fourth century in the writings of Basil and Augustine. Oberman terms this two-source concept of tradition “Tradition 2” (Professor Oberman had many gifts. The ability to coin catchy labels was apparently not one of them). It is not absolutely certain that either Basil or Augustine actually taught the two-source view, but the fact that it is hinted at in their writings ensured that it would eventually find a foothold in the Middle Ages. This would take time, however, for throughout most of the Middle Ages, the dominant view was Tradition 1, the position of the early church. The beginnings of a strong movement toward Tradition 2 did not begin in earnest until the twelfth century. A turning point was reached in the fourteenth century in the writings of William of Ockham. He was one of the first, if not the first, medieval theologian to embrace explicitly the two-source view of revelation. From the fourteenth century onward, then, we witness the parallel development of two opposing views: Tradition 1 and Tradition 2. It is within the context of this ongoing medieval debate that the Reformation occurred.

When the medieval context is kept in view, the Reformation debate over *sola Scriptura* becomes much clearer. The reformers did not invent a new doctrine out of whole cloth. They were continuing a debate that had been going on for centuries. They were reasserting Tradition 1 within their particular historical context to combat the results of Tradition 2 within the Roman Catholic Church. The magisterial reformers argued that Scripture was the sole source of revelation, that it is to be interpreted in and by the church, and that it is to be interpreted within the context of the *regula fidei*. They insisted on returning to the ancient doctrine, and as Tradition 1 became more and more identified with their Protestant cause,

Rome reacted by moving toward Tradition 2 and eventually adopting it officially at the Council of Trent. (Rome has since developed a view that Oberman has termed “Tradition 3,” in which the “Magisterium of the moment” is understood to be the one true source of revelation, but that issue is beyond the scope of this brief essay).

At the same time the magisterial reformers were advocating a return to Tradition 1 (*sola Scriptura*), several radical reformers were calling for the rejection of both Tradition 1 and Tradition 2 and the adoption of a completely new understanding of Scripture and tradition. They argued that Scripture was not merely the only infallible authority but that it was the only authority altogether. The true but subordinate authority of the church and the *regula fidei* were rejected altogether. According to this view (Tradition 0), there is no real sense in which tradition has any authority. Instead, the individual believer requires nothing more than the Holy Spirit and the Bible.

In America during the eighteenth century, this individualistic view of the radical Reformation was combined with the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the populism of the new democracy to create a radical version of Tradition 0 that has all but supplanted the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura* (Tradition 1). This new doctrine, which may be termed “*solo*” *Scriptura* instead of *sola Scriptura*, attacks the rightful subordinate authority of the church and of the ecumenical creeds of the church. Unfortunately, many of its adherents mistakenly believe and teach others that it is the doctrine of Luther and Calvin.

The Reformation Doctrine of Sola Scriptura

To summarize the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, or the Reformation doctrine of the relation between Scripture and tradition, we may say that Scripture is to be understood as the sole source of divine revelation; it is the only inspired, infallible, final, and authoritative norm of faith and practice. It is to be interpreted in and by the church; and it is to be interpreted within the hermeneutical context of the rule of faith. As Richard Muller observes, the Reformed doctrine of *sola Scriptura* did not ever mean, “all of theology ought to be constructed anew, without reference to the church’s tradition of interpretation, by the lonely exegete confronting the naked text.” That this is the Reformation doctrine of Scripture, tradition, and authority may be demonstrated by an examination of the reformers’ writings, only a sampling of which may be mentioned here.

Martin Luther is well known for his declaration at the Diet of Worms: “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God.” Many point to this statement as evidence that Luther rejected Tradition 1, the teaching of the early church, but other factors must be considered before coming to such a conclusion, namely, the historical context of this statement and the fact that Luther said and wrote much more on the subject. As simply one example, in a 1532 letter to Duke Albert of Prussia about the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, Luther wrote the following:

This article moreover, has been clearly believed and held from the beginning of the Christian Church to this hour—a testimony of the entire holy Christian Church, which, if we had nothing besides, should be sufficient for us. For it is dangerous and terrible to hear or believe anything against the united testimony, faith and doctrine,

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of the entire holy Christian Church, as this hath been held now 1,500 years, from the beginning, unanimously in all the world. Whoso now doubted thereon, it is even the same as though he believed in no Christian Church, and he condemneth thus not only the entire holy Christian Church as a damnable heresy, but also Christ himself and all the apostles and prophets.

The second-generation Lutheran scholar Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), writes along similar lines in his *Examination of the Council of Trent*:

This is also certain, that no one should rely on his own wisdom in the interpretation of the Scripture, not even in the clear passages.... We also gratefully and reverently use the labors of the fathers who by their commentaries have profitably clarified many passages of the Scripture. And we confess that we are greatly confirmed by the testimonies of the ancient church in the true and sound understanding of the Scripture. Nor do we approve of it if someone invents for himself a meaning which conflicts with all antiquity, and for which there are clearly no testimonies of the church.

Another of the magisterial reformers who addressed this issue was John Calvin. In the 1559 edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, for example, he writes:

In this way, we willingly embrace and reverence as holy the early councils, such as those of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus I, Chalcedon, and the like, which were concerned with refuting errors—in so far as they relate to the teachings of faith. For they contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture, which the holy fathers applied with spiritual prudence to crush the enemies of religion who had then arisen.

And further:

We indeed willingly concede, if any discussion arises over doctrine, that the best and surest remedy is for a synod of true bishops to be convened, where the doctrine at issue may be examined.

To sum up the traditional Protestant view, the words of the nineteenth-century Reformed theologian Charles Hodge (1797-1878) are appropriate:

Again, Protestants admit that as there has been an uninterrupted tradition of truth from the *protevangelium* to the close of the Apocalypse, so there has been a stream of traditionary teaching flowing through the Christian Church from the day of Pentecost to the present time. This tradition is so far a rule of faith that nothing contrary to it can be true. Christians do not stand isolated, each holding his own creed. They constitute one body, having one common creed. Rejecting that creed, or any of its parts, is the rejection of the fellowship of Christians, incompatible with the communion of saints, or membership in the body of Christ. In other words, Protestants admit that there is a common faith of the Church, which no man is at liberty to reject, and which no man can reject and be a Christian.

The Revisionist Doctrine of “solo” Scriptura

In contrast with the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, the revisionist doctrine of “solo” *Scriptura* is marked by radical individualism and a rejection of the authority of the church and the ecumenical creeds. If we compare the statements made by advocates of “solo” *Scriptura* with the statements of Reformational Christians above, the difference is immediately evident. It is also important to observe the source of this doctrine in early America. As Nathan O. Hatch notes, the first Americans to push the right of private judgment over against the church and the creeds were unorthodox ministers.

The liberal minister Simeon Howard (1733-1804), for example, advised pastors to “lay aside all attachment to human systems, all partiality to names, councils and churches, and honestly inquire, what saith the Scriptures?” In his own effort to overturn orthodox Christianity, Charles Beecher (1815-1900) denounced “creed power” and argued for “the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.” The universalist minister A. B. Grosh (d. 1884) declared in a similar way, “In religious faith we have but one Father and one Master, and the Bible, the Bible, is our only acknowledged creed book.”

The radical American version of “solo” *Scriptura* reached its fullest expression in the writings of the Restorationists as they applied the principles of Democratic populism to Enlightenment Christianity. In 1809, the Restorationist Elias Smith (1769-1846) proclaimed, “Venture to be as independent in things of religion, as those which respect the government in which you live.” Barton Stone (1772-1844) declared that the past should be “consigned to the rubbish heap upon which Christ was crucified.” Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) made his individualistic view of Scripture very clear, declaring, “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 to-day, 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.” As the Reformed Princeton theologian Samuel Miller (1769-1850) rightly observed, “the most zealous opposers [of creeds] have generally been latitudinarians and heretics.”

Why “Solo” Scriptura Must Be Rejected

The revisionist doctrine of “solo” *Scriptura* has become so entrenched in the modern church that many Protestant Christians today will sympathize more with the sentiments of the liberal and sectarian clergymen quoted above than they will with the teaching of the reformers. The doctrine of “solo” *Scriptura*, however, is as problematic and dangerous today as it was in previous centuries. It remains unbiblical, illogical, and unworkable. Here I will address some of the more obvious problems.

The fundamental problem with “solo” *Scriptura* is that it results in autonomy. It results in final authority being placed somewhere other than the Word of God. It shares this problem with the Roman Catholic doctrine. The only difference is that the Roman Catholic doctrine places final authority in the church while “solo” *Scriptura* places final authority in each individual believer. Every doctrine and practice is measured against a final standard, and that final standard is the individual’s personal judgment of what is and is not biblical. The

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result is subjectivism and relativism. The reformers' appeal to "Scripture alone," however, was never intended to mean "me alone."

The Bible itself simply does not teach "solo" *Scriptura*. Christ established his church with a structure of authority and gives to his church those who are specially appointed to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:2-4). When disputes arose, the apostles did not instruct each individual believer to go home and decide by himself and for himself who was right. They met in a council (Acts 15:6-29). Even the well-known example of the Bereans does not support "solo" *Scriptura* (cf. Acts 17:10-11; cf. vv. 1-9). Paul did not instruct each individual Berean to go home and decide by himself and for himself whether what he was teaching was true. Instead, the Bereans read and studied the Scriptures of the Old Testament day by day with Paul present in order to see whether his teaching about the Messiah was true.

In terms of hermeneutics, the doctrine of "solo" *Scriptura* is hopeless. With "solo" *Scriptura*, the interpretation of Scripture becomes subjective and relative, and there is no possibility for the resolution of differences. It is a matter of fact that there are numerous different interpretations of various parts of Scripture. Adherents of "solo" *Scriptura* are told that these different interpretations can be resolved simply by an appeal to Scripture. But how is the problem of differing interpretations to be resolved by an appeal to another interpretation? All appeals to Scripture are appeals to interpretations of Scripture. The only real question is: whose interpretation? People with differing interpretations of Scripture cannot set a Bible on a table and ask it to resolve their differences. In order for the Scripture to function as an authority, it must be read and interpreted by someone. According to "solo" *Scriptura*, that someone is each individual, so ultimately, there are as many final authorities as there are human interpreters. This is subjectivism and relativism run amuck. The proponents of "solo" *Scriptura* rightly condemn the hermeneutical tyranny of Rome, but the solution to hermeneutical tyranny is not hermeneutical anarchy.

The doctrine of "solo" *Scriptura* also faces historical problems due to the fact that it cannot be reconciled with the reality that existed in the first decades and centuries of the church. If "solo" *Scriptura* were true, much of the church had no standard of truth for many years. In the first century, one could not walk down to his local Christian bookstore and buy a copy of the Bible. Manuscripts had to be hand-copied and were not found in every believer's home. The first books of the New Testament did not even begin to be written until at least ten years after the death of Christ, and some were not written until several decades after Christ. Gradually some churches obtained copies of some books, while other churches had copies of others. It took many years before the New Testament as we know it was gathered and available as a whole. Even then, it too was hand-copied, so it was not available in the home of every individual Christian. If the lone individual is to judge and evaluate everything by himself and for himself by measuring it against Scripture, as proponents of "solo" *Scriptura* would have it, how would this have possibly worked in the first decades of the church before the New Testament was completed?

One of the most self-evident problems related to the doctrine of "solo" *Scriptura* is the question of the canon. If one is going to claim that Scripture is the only authority whatsoever, it is legitimate to ask how we then define what is and is not "Scripture." Proponents of "solo" *Scriptura* claim that Scripture is authoritative but cannot say with any authority what Scripture is. The table of contents in the front of the Bible is not itself an inspired text written by a prophet or an apostle. It is, in a very real sense, a *creed* of the church declaring what the

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church believes to be the content of Scripture. One way to illustrate the problem “solo” *Scriptura* faces in connection with the canon is simply to ask the following: How would “solo” *Scriptura* deal with a modern day Marcion? How, for example, would a proponent of “solo” *Scriptura* argue with a person who claimed that the real New Testament includes only the books of Luke, Acts, Romans, and Revelation? He can’t appeal to the church, to history, or to tradition. A self-consistent adherent of “solo *Scriptura*” would have no way to respond to such a view because, as one such consistent adherent informed me in personal correspondence, it is the right and duty of each individual Christian to determine the canonicity of each biblical book by and for himself. This is the only consistent position for a proponent of “solo” *Scriptura* to take, but it is self-defeating because it destroys any objective notion of Scripture. One cannot appeal to the biblical authority of Romans, for example, if each believer determines for himself whether Romans is in fact to be considered a canonical and authoritative biblical book.

The question of the canon is not the only theological problem caused by “solo” *Scriptura*. Another serious problem is the fact that the adoption of “solo” *Scriptura* destroys the possibility of having any objective definition of what Christianity is and is not. “Solo” *Scriptura* destroys the very concepts of orthodoxy and heresy. If the authority of the ecumenical creeds is rejected, and if each individual believer is to determine all questions of doctrine by and for himself, then the definitions of orthodoxy and heresy are completely relative and subjective. One man judges the doctrine of the Trinity to be biblical. Another deems it unbiblical. One judges “open theism” biblical. Another deems it unbiblical. The same is true with respect to every other doctrine. Each man defines Christianity as it seems right in his own eyes.

Finally, it must be realized that “solo” *Scriptura* ignores reality. The Bible simply did not drop out of the sky into our laps. We would not even be able to read a Bible for ourselves were it not for the labors of many others including archaeologists, linguists, scribes, textual critics, historians, translators, and more. If “solo” *Scriptura* were true, it should be possible to give untranslated ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of biblical, apocryphal, and pseudepigraphal texts to some isolated tribe member somewhere on earth, and with no one’s assistance, that individual should be able to learn the Hebrew and Greek languages, read the various manuscripts, determine which of them are canonical, and then come to an orthodox understanding of the Christian faith. The reason this is not possible, however, is because “solo” *Scriptura* is not true. It is an unbiblical distortion of the truth.

The revisionist doctrine of “solo” *Scriptura* has been a source of great damage to the cause of Christ. The magisterial reformers were right to reject the early versions of it that appeared in the teaching of some radicals. Contemporary heirs of the reformers must follow the magisterial reformers here. The fight must be fought on two fronts. We are not only to reject the Roman Catholic doctrine (whether the two-source doctrine of Tradition 2 or the *sola ecclesia* doctrine of Tradition 3), which places final autonomous authority in the church. We must also reject the revisionist doctrine of “solo” *Scriptura*, which places final autonomous authority in the hands of each and every individual.

Sources: For more information on Heiko Oberman’s concept of Tradition 1, see his work *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), p. 280. For background information on Tradition 0, see Alister McGrath’s *Reformation Thought*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 144. For other background information on “solo” Scriptura see Nathan O. Hatch, “sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” in *The Bible in America*, ed. N. Hatch and M. Noll, pp. 59-78. The quotation from Richard Muller is taken from his *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), p. 51. Luther’s letter to Duke Albert of Prussia is cited in Philip Schaff’s *The Principle of Protestantism* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964 [1845]), pp. 116-117, note). Chemnitz’s quote can be found in *Examination of the Council of Trent*, tr. Fred Kramer, Vol. 1, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), pp. 208-209. The quotations from Calvin are taken from his *Institutes*, 4.9.8 and 4.9.13. Mr. Mathison has taken his quotation of Charles Hodge from Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, pp. 113-114. Comments from Nathan Hatch on the revisionist doctrine of “solo” Scriptura are taken from “sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” in *The Bible in America*, ed. N. Hatch and M. Noll, p. 62. The quotation from Samuel Miller is found in *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions* (Greenville, SC: A Press, 1991 [1839]), p. 15. For a fuller discussion on this topic, Mr. Mathison refers readers to his book *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Canon Press, 2001).