

## ***Sola Scriptura* after 500 Years: The Fate of a Reformation Slogan**

By  
**Warren C. Trenchard**  
ASRS 2017

A set of three Latin slogans has long been associated with and deemed to be characteristic of the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. These are *sola scriptura* (“by Scripture alone”), *sola fide* (“by faith alone”), and *sola gratia* (“by grace alone”).<sup>1</sup> Not only is *sola scriptura* typically listed first, but it is also understood to be foundational to the others and to the whole of Reformation theology.

As a basic principle of the Reformation, *sola scriptura* is generally understood to mean that Christian faith and practice are to be founded upon biblical injunctions alone and not on those of Church teachings or tradition, on the decisions of Church councils, or on the dictates of Church leaders. In some cases, *sola scriptura* meant that the Bible contained all that is necessary for the interpretation of the Bible, i.e., the Bible interprets itself, or that it is sufficient for faith and practice.

This year represents the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation as symbolized by Martin Luther’s posting 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg. More descriptive was another title associated with the document, “Disputation on the Power of Indulgences.” Accordingly, this dramatic act was Luther’s attack on the Roman Church’s practice of selling indulgences, which were certificates that purported to grant the purchasers or their relatives temporary relief from punishment for sins. The document did not roll out any of the *sola* slogans, including *sola scriptura*.<sup>2</sup>

While Luther’s 95 Theses referred tangentially to the Bible, it was not until 1519 in his public debate with Professor Johann Eck that Luther launched *sola scriptura*. Eck asked how Luther could understand the Bible without the popes, councils, and universities. Luther replied, “A simple layman armed with scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it.”<sup>3</sup>

In debates and hearings over the next few years Luther continued to rely on and develop this concept as a defensive response to his critics.<sup>4</sup> He did not systematically structure the notion or apply it consistently. Although the other reformers espoused some form of this principle, they practiced it differently and often reached very different interpretative conclusions using it, e.g.,

---

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes modern reflections on the Reformation include *solo Christo* (“through Christ alone”) and *solī Deo Gloria* (“glory to God alone”) and even *sola ecclesia* (“the Church alone”) and *sola caritas* (“charitable love alone”).

<sup>2</sup> In some ways, this was a strange document to be associated with the launch of the Protestant Reformation. It was a very focused, practical attack on a specific Church practice that Luther opposed. It was not a declaration of ecclesiastical independence, the launch of a counter movement, or a systematic statement of a Reformation theology.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Bible: A Biography* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 163.

<sup>4</sup> S. L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 3: *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 3-4.

Luther and Zwingli on the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> The principle of *sola scriptura*, did not have an auspicious start.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the status of *sola scriptura* half a millennium after its inception. In particular, I will examine the veracity and effectiveness of this Reformation slogan for modern readers of the biblical text and members of faith communities that value the Bible. I will focus mainly on some of the challenging issues that this doctrine faces.

Let us first consider the problems for *sola scriptura* associated with text, translation, and canon, which all concern the integrity of the Bible, i.e., the makeup of *scriptura*. The Bible itself addresses none of these matters. Each requires external scholarship and decisions.

Textual critics study the numerous variant readings of clauses, phrases, and individual words to determine the most likely original readings of biblical texts. Before anyone attempts to interpret a particular text, he or she must go through the complex process of establishing its most likely original reading. The interpreter must either do this personally or accept the judgment of specialists. Because textual scholars do not always agree, there are multiple reconstructions of biblical texts that claim originality. Thus, there is no uniform Bible or *scriptura*. Furthermore, the Bible offers no help for text critical questions<sup>6</sup> and, in this regard, is certainly not its own interpreter. This clearly undermines *sola scriptura*.

After establishing or accepting the most likely original text of the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament, some specialists and most laypersons depend on translations of these texts into languages they understand. Because translation always involves interpretation, there are often wide variations of meaning between the original language texts and the translation texts and among the various translations themselves. To further complicate things, some translations are based on other translations and not on original language texts.<sup>7</sup>

The most significant ancient biblical translation project was the effort to render the Hebrew Bible into Hellenistic Greek to accommodate Diaspora Jews. The result was the Septuagint (LXX), which also became the Bible of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians. However, in places the LXX differs significantly from the Hebrew text.

Translators do not always work with the same original language text or operate with the same translation philosophy. While some try to reflect literal meanings of the parent languages in the daughter languages, others seek meaning equivalences in the daughter languages, and still others

---

<sup>5</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution--A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 69. Thomas Albert Howard and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Protestantism after 500 years* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 157, 195. Armstrong, 173. This disagreement also included Calvin. Justin S. Holcomb, ed., *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 121-22.

<sup>6</sup> The New Testament is not just silent on how to establish the original text of the Old Testament. It actually contains numerous instances of quoting or alluding to textual readings that favor the LXX over the Masoretic Hebrew text or for which there is no manuscript evidence of any sort.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., the *Vetus Latina* of the Old Testament was a translation of the Septuagint not the Hebrew Bible. The Latin Vulgate of the whole Bible was the *Vorlage* for translations into various European languages including French, Czech, and English (e.g., Wycliffe's translation and the Great Bible).

operate somewhere between these extremes. Thus, translations of the same biblical text can vary significantly.

The Bible provides no guidance for translators. The process lies entirely outside the biblical text. The multiplicity of meanings, even for an individual sentence, that results from essential translation activities seriously undermines the validity of *sola scriptura*.

The question of canon moves from the micro considerations of text criticism and the interpretative concerns of translation to the macro decisions that concern what documents, among the wide variety of alternatives, would ultimately constitute the Old and New Testaments. Although we have no access to such deliberations concerning the Law and Prophets sections of the Hebrew Bible, we are aware of Rabbinic debates about the acceptability of some documents pertaining to the Writings section.

The LXX represents a serious canonical problem for Christian readers of the Old Testament. This is because the LXX, with its set of additional documents, largely equal to the Apocrypha, was the main Bible of early Christians. Most significantly, this includes the writers of the New Testament, who liberally quoted from it or alluded to it in their own writings, thereby extending any perceived authority of their own to the LXX.

Originally, Christians deemed their own writings as secondary to the Jewish scriptures (LXX) and the oral tradition of Jesus' teachings. They did not begin to discuss the comparative authoritative status of these writings until the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. By the end of that century, largely the result of simple usage, Christian leaders generally and uncritically accepted four gospels and thirteen letters associated with Paul as constituting the authoritative Christian writings. Regional, theological, and practical differences remained throughout Christendom for the next two centuries concerning the New Testament. Although there were a few regional dissenters, by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century the New Testament canon was finally settled. It was seriously reconsidered until Luther's concerns about a Christological canon within the biblical canon and with a particular set of New Testament documents that troubled him theologically. This is an interesting reflection of the fragility of *sola scriptura* even during the Reformation.

These issues concerning the Old and New Testament canons constitute a serious problem for *sola scriptura*. The Bible does not define these canons nor address such matters. The discussions, debates, and decisions of canon lie entirely outside the Bible. They were conducted by Jewish and Christian scholars and leaders over centuries in various parts of the world. Without such activities there would be no Old or New Testaments or at least no consensus concerning the make up of these collections. This effectively nullifies the concept of *sola scriptura*.

The fundamental matter of what constitutes the Bible, as evidenced by the issues of text, translation, and canon, requires procedures and processes, as well as scholarship and decisions, conducted by authoritative persons and groups within communities of faith. All of this lies outside the Bible itself and is alien to *sola scriptura*.

Apart from the problematic issues associated with what constitutes the Bible, or the *scriptura* element of the Reformation slogan, the contents of the Bible exhibit characteristics that are alien to the veracity of the slogan.

Let us consider the matter of contradictions within the biblical text. If *sola scriptura* is valid, we should reasonably expect the Bible, as the presumed single, authoritative source for faith and practice, as well as all matters pertaining to God's activities in human history, society, and the natural world, to be consistent in its contents not only within both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures but also between the two.

However, there is no such consistency. The Bible contains numerous discrepancies and contradictions on people counts, ages, measurements, family relationships, event orders, genealogies, etc. In the New Testament the most contradictory material occurs in the Gospels from the Infancy Narratives<sup>8</sup> to the Passion Narratives<sup>9</sup> and what comes between.<sup>10</sup>

Without elaboration, let me merely note a few significant contradictions found wholly or partially in Genesis:

- Genesis contains two different and sometimes contradictory creation stories.<sup>11</sup>
- Adam was to have died the day he ate the forbidden fruit but lived for 930 years.<sup>12</sup>
- The composite Flood story contains contradictory elements.<sup>13</sup>
- The Nephilim existed before the Flood and after the Flood but were not on the ark.<sup>14</sup>

The most compelling biblical contradiction that I know involves Mark's narrative<sup>15</sup> of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter with its embedded healing story of a hemorrhaging woman. Matthew's account<sup>16</sup> has all the essential, Markan details with one major difference. As the story starts in Mark the official tells Jesus his daughter is dying; in Matthew he says that she has died. Both accounts cannot be historical.<sup>17</sup> Such irreconcilable contradictions nullify *sola scriptura*.

---

<sup>8</sup> E.g., did Jesus' family move to Nazareth to avoid Herod's son (Matthew) or was that their original home (Luke)?

<sup>9</sup> E.g., did Jesus carry his own cross (John) or did Simon of Cyrene carry his cross (Matthew, Mark, Luke)?

<sup>10</sup> E.g., did James and John ask Jesus for a favor (Mk 10:35) or did their mother ask for a favor for them (Mt 20:20)?

<sup>11</sup> Gn 1:1-2:3; 2:4-25. Some of the contradictions include:

Different pre-creation conditions: water chaos vs. desert chaos

Different first creation: light vs. male human

Different order: vegetation > male and female humans vs. male human > vegetation

Different order: birds and land animals > male and female humans vs. male human > birds and land animals > female human

<sup>12</sup> Gn 2:17; 5:5.

<sup>13</sup> Gn 6-8. Some of the contradictions include:

One pair of all animals enter the ark vs. seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of other animals enter the ark

The flood lasts 150 days vs. 40 days

A raven sent to test for dry land vs. a dove sent to test for dry land

<sup>14</sup> Gn 6:4; Num 13:33.

<sup>15</sup> Mk 5:22-43; cf. Lk 8:41-56.

<sup>16</sup> 9:18-25.

<sup>17</sup> Both versions of the story are complex narratives with the same embedded sub narrative. They share 26 specific narrative details, differing only on the significant matter of whether the girl was alive or dead at the beginning. To argue that the two versions represent separate historical events would be preposterous. The probability against that being the case is enormous. It would require two separate instances of a synagogue official asking Jesus to heal his daughter or raise her from the dead, Jesus healing a woman with a 12-year hemorrhage on the way to the official's

Most Christians believe that divine revelation consists of both special and natural elements. Special revelation involves things like the Bible and the witness of Jesus. Natural or general revelation conveys the knowledge of God and God's activities revealed in the universe and nature.<sup>18</sup> While the former has been thoroughly analyzed, the latter has received scant attention by comparison.

Whatever the authoritative range of the Bible as revelation may be, it does not include nature. That can only be the domain of natural revelation. Therefore, natural revelation alone, not the Bible, is authoritative regarding God's activities in the universe and nature. As such, it cannot be judged or trumped by the Bible. It is through the study of nature, whether macro or micro, that such revelation of God is unveiled.

We call the study of nature, science. The multiple disciplines of science follow a well-established method that includes eventual self-correction. These disciplines range from the macro research of the universe to the micro study of sub-atomic particles and living cell components. Even when scientists disagree among themselves, a broad consensus emerges over time. Furthermore, unlike biblical scholars, scientists often have the benefit of proof in the practical application of their theories and laws.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, while the Bible may normatively reveal God as the source of the universe and its contents, it is science, as the window into natural revelation, that normatively reveals how and when God went about this creative activity. This makes *sola scriptura* meaningless.

That the Bible is not normative regarding the natural world is also evident by the bad science that it often displays. Without addressing the issue of biblical miracles, I simply note two examples of untenable science in Genesis:

- The firmament contains the sun, moon, stars, and birds (1:14-18, 20).
- Jacob breeds animals in front of striped rods to produce striped offspring (30:37-42).<sup>20</sup>

The Bible was written over many centuries by many people of different religions and cultures in many places. It faithfully reflects these differences and cultures, often conveying the distortions, misunderstandings, and fallacies of the people involved. Such distortions extend even to ideology and theology<sup>21</sup> including descriptions of God and God's attitudes and behaviors. They certain-

---

house, and Jesus' resuscitating the daughter. All this would have to occur in Galilee during Jesus' brief ministry there, as portrayed by the Synoptic Gospels.

<sup>18</sup> The Bible recognizes the validity of natural revelation, e.g., Ps 19:1-6; Rom 1:19-20.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., humans have not only developed viewpoints about gravity and the orbits of heavenly bodies but have also travelled to the moon and returned based on these theories.

<sup>20</sup> Leviticus contains numerous examples of untenable biology, including rock badgers and hares chewing the cud (Lv 11:5-6); leprosy being cured by various cultic rituals (Lv 14); becoming "unclean" by touching an unclean animal but only until the evening (Lv 11:23-40); a woman birthing a daughter becomes ceremonially unclean twice as long as one birthing a son (Lev 12:1-5). In Dt 1:10 Moses considers the Israelites to be "as numerous as the stars of heaven" (which one estimate puts at 1 with 24 zeros!). Hebrew cosmology understood the universe to consist of heaven, earth, and the underworld (Ex 20:4; Dt 5:8; cf. Phil 2:10; Rev 5:3, 13).

<sup>21</sup> I appreciate a colleague reminding me of the contrasting theological positions of Proverbs/Deuteronomistic History/Prophets vs. Ecclesiastes/Job and the theology of liberation vs. the theology of conquest in the Hebrew Bible. The

ly include distortions of social and domestic roles, political structures, mathematical precision, historical reality, and scientific principles. This is not because such people were devious but because they lived in societies and cultures that universally understood things as they did. Given their contexts, their perspectives are entirely expected. However, in none of these regards should the Bible be taken as normative. For example, if we wish to establish the content or chronology of one or more events of the past, we must consider the evidence from historical analysis and archaeology. While the Bible may help us pose questions of history, it cannot determine the answers. Only the disciplines of historical analysis can cut through the cultural conditioning of the Bible to find genuine answers to historical questions. Thus, *sola scriptura* has no validity.

The devaluation of tradition associated with *sola scriptura* in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century is neither recognized nor supported by the Bible. On the contrary, biblical writers often acknowledged that they received their beliefs and ideas through tradition, i.e., passed from person to person and from group to group.<sup>22</sup>

The Bible has many traditional inclusions, such as creed<sup>23</sup> and hymn<sup>24</sup> fragments. Sometimes the traditional material in the New Testament comes from Jewish Pseudepigrapha<sup>25</sup> and pagan authors.<sup>26</sup> Paul approvingly recognizes both the process of tradition<sup>27</sup> and its superior value.<sup>28</sup> Far from the Bible setting itself apart from or above tradition, the biblical text recognizes that it is, at least in part, the product of tradition and freely incorporates it.

Not all contemporary Christian teachings and practices have a biblical basis or authority. Notably, the Bible contains no systematic consideration of doctrine and no comprehensive manual of Christian practice. More specifically, there is no biblical basis for particular ecclesiastical structures and governance, for the practice of infant baptism, for the doctrine of the Trinity, for prohibiting the consumption of alcoholic beverages, for combining foot washing with the Eucharist,

---

New Testament also contains the very contrasting theological perspectives of the Fourth Gospel vs. the Synoptics, Paul vs. James, etc.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., Luke declared “many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on (*παρέδοσαν*) to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (1:1-2).

<sup>23</sup> E.g., Dt 6:4; 1 Kgs 18:39; Acts 8:36-37; Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 8:6; 12:3; 1 Thes 4:14; 1 Tm 3:16; 1 Pt 3:18; 1 Jn 4:2.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., all the Psalms; Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:1-3; 1 Pt 2:21-25. Revelation contains hymns in chapters 4, 5, 7, 15, and 19.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., 1 Cor 11:10; 1 Pt 3:19-20; 2 Pt 2:4; Jude 6, 9, 14-15.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; Ti 1:12.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., 2 Thes 3:6; 1 Cor 11:2.

<sup>28</sup> “For I handed on (*παρέδωκα*) to you as of first importance (*ἐν πρώτοις*) what I in turn had received (*παρέλαβον*)” (1 Cor 15:3a). He proceeded to quote this significant confessional tradition in vv. 3b-5a:

that Christ died  
for our sins  
according to the scriptures,  
and that he was buried,  
and that he was raised  
on the third day  
according to the scriptures,  
and that he was seen

for the investigative judgment, or for the notion of biblical inerrancy. If *sola scriptura* were valid, we should expect that all Christian doctrines and practices would be authorized by biblical injunction. They clearly are not.

Conversely, few, and in some cases no, modern Christians believe or practice all biblical teachings, e.g., the cultic purity laws of Leviticus, baptism for the dead, speaking in tongues, subordination of wives to husbands, advice to slaves, or restrictions on the role of women in worship. If *sola scriptura* were valid, we should also expect that all Christians would believe and uphold the whole range of biblical teachings and practices. They clearly do not.

Finally, a practical problem for *sola scriptura* is the incredible fragmentation of Christianity that has stemmed from the Reformation and its tacit endorsement of individual interpretations.<sup>29</sup> The application of the slogan has not moved Christians toward the validating unity that Jesus desired.<sup>30</sup> Rather, it has spawned division and often hatred and violence over competing scriptural interpretations. Ironically, this fragmentation had begun while the Reformers were still alive.

Recognizing the challenges that plague *sola scriptura*, some Christians<sup>31</sup> have proposed a presumably more compelling slogan—*prima scriptura* (“scripture is first”). This concept asserts that the Bible is primary among all other forms of revelation and knowledge including tradition.

However, *prima scriptura* suffers most of the same problems as its more restrictive counterpart, including those of text, translation, and canon. Furthermore, the Bible is not normative as revelation concerning the natural world, which is the revelatory purview of science. Whether *sola* or *prima*, the Bible is still culturally conditioned and often obsolete, still full of internal contradictions, and still often unhistorical and unscientific.

I conclude, therefore, that after 500 years the Reformation slogan *sola scriptura* is both theologically bankrupt and functionally invalid. It was never firmly established even during the Reformation period. The problems associated with it that I have reviewed are formidable. The attempt to soften *sola scriptura* into *prima scriptura* does not nullify these problems, leaving neither doctrine defensible.

In light of all this, what then is the Bible, if it is not *sola* or *prima*? It is the earliest, and in many cases, the only source of testimony to the life, culture, concerns, events, practices, and beliefs of Ancient Israel and Earliest Christianity. It is also an important witness to the development and trajectories of such practices and beliefs over the time spans of the Hebrew and Christian texts. Within its mass of time and place-conditioned content are valuable timeless reflections of practical wisdom, spiritual development, and ethical behavior. There is important testimony of personal and communal encounter with and understanding of God. Above all, the Bible introduces us to Jesus of Nazareth and his mission to reveal the God of the poor, the outcast, and the marginalized—a revelation that challenges us to walk in his way.

---

<sup>29</sup> The number of Protestant denominations varies greatly, depending on how one defines “denomination.” A number in the hundreds seems much more reasonable than 9,000, as reported in the *World Christian Encyclopedia*.

<sup>30</sup> Jn 17:21-23.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox, Methodists, and some Roman Catholics.