



## The uses and abuses of *Sola Scriptura*

One of the ideas that has informed this series on Protestantism is the prevailing notion among many Christians in North America that the days of Protestant and Roman Catholic antagonism are over. In her recent book on the emerging church movement, for instance, *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle argues that Christendom is on the verge of a realignment so dramatic that it will render the differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants as useless and anachronistic. The authors of this series remain skeptical of such claims, and yet we also concede that past American Protestant polemics against Rome have been misguided and may be responsible for overstatements like Tickle's.

A firmer case for Protestantism drives us back to the "formal" and "material" principles of the Protestant Reformation. Because the Bible is the only source and the norm of Christian belief (*sola Scriptura*), the Bible is considered *the formal* cause of the Reformation. It is the basis of our confession of the *material* principle, justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).

The centrality of the Bible is obvious for a group known as "people of the Book." Conservative Protestants have traditionally established a reputation for being far more biblically literate than Roman Catholics, as many American adherents of Rome readily concede. Who would not choose the Word of God over the words of men? Despite Roman Catholic claims that the Bible itself does not teach *sola Scriptura*, biblical proof-texts are readily at the fingertips of many Protestant lay people. For example, Deuteronomy 4:2 warns that no human word is to be added to God's authoritative Word. The Psalms exclaim that the Word of God is distinct in its purity, perfection, and endurance (Psalm 19:7-11). And the sacred writings of Scripture are God-breathed and thus they alone make us wise unto salvation (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

### A Protestant consensus

Not without reason is the first chapter, on Scripture, the longest by far in the Westminster Confession of Faith. In unfolding the doctrine of Scripture, the Westminster divines were summarizing a Protestant consensus on the nature, authority, and purpose of Scripture. This consensus is readily evident in the creeds of other Protestant churches.

From the *Thirty Nine Articles* of the Church of England (1563), for example, we read:

*"Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation." In addition, the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1580) states: "we receive and embrace with our whole heart the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and **New** Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged."*

As clear as these non-Reformed affirmations were, the Reformed wing of Protestantism articulated the formal principle of the Reformation most explicitly. The Reformed church was always being reformed *according to the Word of God*. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism succinctly put it: *"the word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him."*

The Protestant doctrine of Scripture sought to refute Roman Catholic claims about its own extra-canonical authority. Rome argued that Scripture and tradition were dual sources of divine revelation for the church. In this way, it had, in the words of Martin Luther, put a "gag" over the mouth of the Bible. The Reformers countered that the church was governed by one authority, the written Word of God.

Expressing the doctrine of *sola scriptura* so plainly does not mean it is as easily understood as the idea of *the Bible only*. There is more to the Protestant doctrine of Scripture than meets the eye. How should Protestants handle tradition? What about the legitimate authority of ministers who minister as undershepherds of the Good Shepherd? How can Reformed Christians confess *sola Scriptura* while subscribing to Reformed confessions?

## **Understanding revelation**

Contrary to popular misconception, *sola Scriptura* does not mean that the Bible is the only revelation. The Bible is *part* of God's revelation to humanity. Romans 1:18-23 instruct us that *"the light of nature shows there is a God."* This is knowledge enough to convict even unbelievers of sin and leaves them without excuse. But it is not enough knowledge to save. Creation and the natural world do not reveal Christ.

Thus we need to distinguish between general and special revelation. General revelation reveals a God who has created all things. Special revelation makes known the salvation of God: it reveals Christ and the way we receive the forgiveness of sins. The Belgic Confession summarizes the two-fold nature of divine revelation in this way:

*"We know (God) by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity ... Second, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own."*

(Article 2)

These "two books" general and special revelation, form the argument of the Westminster Confession in 21.1:

*The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.*

Which of these forms of revelation is sufficient? Clear? Or authoritative? The answer is *both*. Wherever God reveals himself, he speaks with sufficiency, clarity, and authority, for the purposes that he intends. When *sola Scriptura* is distorted to deny God's truth in general revelation, we lose sight of the importance of the natural order and the way God has revealed his justice, holiness, goodness, and truth. Unbelievers clearly try to suppress this knowledge, but it is there and cannot be denied (which is why they are without excuse). *Sola Scriptura*, properly understood, underscores that only in the Bible do we find Christ. The "light of nature" is not revelation that saves. Only in Scripture do we discover God's will for salvation.

## **Understanding authority**

Just as God has revealed himself beyond the Bible, so has he established authorities other than his Word. The Bible is our *ultimate* authority, but that does not negate or make unnecessary the role of other authorities. The doctrine of sphere sovereignty, championed by Abraham Kuyper, is an effort to acknowledge this. Sphere sovereignty identifies three main institutions that hold God-ordained authority, namely, the family, the church, and the civil magistrate. Many Protestants today have no difficulty acknowledging family and state, but they struggle with church authority. Because it is an ordinance of God, the church is a God-ordained authority in our lives. When the church, through its officers and councils, ministerially declares the word of God, its judgments are *"to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word"* (WCF 31.3).

The Westminster Confession is particularly zealous to defend the authority of the church in the chapter on Christian liberty and liberty of conscience. The confession warns against Christian liberty descending into license by overturning God-ordained institutions: *"they who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God."* Such libertines, the Confession goes on to warn, *"are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the church, they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against, by the censures of the church"* (20.4). Christian liberty properly understood does free Christians from the tyranny of the church. But the legitimate authority of the church is not inherently tyrannical, because God ordained the church to rule and discipline his people. Rome had abused its power, but the Reformers did not throw out church authority with ecclesiastical tyranny.

Some Protestants find the idea of church authority hard to believe, but if the Bible were our only authority, why the need for pastors or for preaching?

Historic Protestantism never devolved into a me-and-my-Bible individualism. God called pastors to minister the Word to the people of God on a weekly basis. This is why the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) could assert a remarkably high view of the church and her ministers:

*"The Preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good."*

## **Sola Scriptura today**

These confessional statements sound far removed from contemporary sentiments, because the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is under assault from several directions. David Wells argues that many Protestants today profess Biblical authority but practice a commitment to something else. In the rhetoric of many mega churches and emergent churches, the "relevance" of the Bible is a more cherished attribute than its authority. To be relevant, the mission of the church must be recast by polling, marketing, and other demographic data. The result, according to Wells, is that *sola Scriptura* is usurped by *sola cultura*: the culture (or more specifically, the marketplace) determines the shape and practice of the church.

Another threat comes from the temptation to set man-made creeds over against the pure teaching of the Bible, as if the Reformed church's confessions are unbiblical. This is to distort *sola Scriptura* and turn it into *solo Scriptura*, or Biblicism. Protestants did not abandon creeds when they rediscovered biblical authority. On the contrary, *sola Scriptura* drove them to write new confessions. Biblical authority is not only compatible with confessional subscription but a necessary component of the teaching ministry Christ gave to his disciples. This does not mean that confessions cannot err; Protestants have always acknowledged that councils can and do err, and creeds are subject to revision. We must always read creeds in the light of the Word. But creeds are not opposed to the Bible. Their function is to summarize and defend the Bible.

Moreover, confessions are not merely human opinions. Confessions give guidelines and supply boundaries for ordination, fellowship, and membership, and so they are part of the church's ministry as *"an ordinance of God."* As churchly statements, confessions offer a place to stand and room to roam.

At this point, many Biblicists raise the question: what happens when the Bible and the creed conflict? What if the Bible says one thing and the confessions say something else? We need to be cautious about posing this question, because some may assume too much self-confidence in their own understanding of the Bible. Nineteenth century theologian William Shedd describes this as a *"specious and fallacious"* appeal to Scripture. It is really an assertion of the individual's interpretation of Scripture, *"the contents of Scripture as reached by human investigation and exegesis."* over against the creed; it is not the pure Bible against the less than pure man-made creed.

In other words, the question above should be rephrased in this way: what happens when the church's interpretation of the Bible differs from my interpretation of the Bible? This way of stating underscores the importance of caution and humility in seeking to revise the confession of the church. Shedd argues that when individuals seek revisions to confessional documents, what they really demand is "conformation to Scripture as he and those like him read and explain it."

Confessions, therefore, enable us to submit to the authority of Scripture within a community of faith. Here is where another contemporary objection arises. Is this position really Protestant? Or has it reverted to the Roman Catholic teaching on the church? Protestants have always argued that the church is the interpreter of Scripture, but it denies that church authority is located infallibly in the bishop of Rome.

Challenges to the Protestant creeds owe more to revivalism and individualism, not to historic Protestantism. Nathan Hatch's book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, explains how nineteenth century evangelicalism set loose certain convictions that reshaped Protestant understandings of *sola Scriptura*. Among them was an anti-creedal impulse that repudiated all theological formulations. Closely connected was anti-clericalism. Just as no theological opinion was better than any other, so the holder of that doctrinal conviction, whether living or dead, was no better than any other believer.

### **What about tradition?**

Bible-onlyism threatens all churchly authority in order to render the individual Bible reader sovereign. Without the communion of the saints to guide — a fellowship that would typically extend to clergy of the present and worthies of the past — everyone could interpret the Bible for himself. This biblicism is vulnerable to the Roman Catholic charge that Protestantism removed one pope only to replace him with a million popes.

Moreover, this impulse is often the tipping point for Protestants who convert to Rome. After all, the Roman Catholic Church demonstrates a respect for tradition and the ancient witness of the church that is often belittled by Protestants. Its liturgy displays order and dignity, and its social ethic defends life in the womb and beyond. In contrast, evangelical convictions seem but a generation old and threatened with obsolescence by the very next thing emerging in its next generation.

But historic Protestantism, firmly committed to *sola Scriptura*, avoids these distortions. Protestantism rejects the claim of Pope Pius IX, who said in 1870, "*I am tradition.*" But it has always valued the importance of tradition, by which it meant the interpretation of the word of God by its fathers in the faith. There is a legitimate sense of tradition, and a proper way in which Calvinists can revere the "Reformed tradition." As John Murray explained, Protestants and Roman Catholics both believe in tradition. The question is whether "unwritten traditions" are as authoritative as Scripture itself. Murray concluded,

*"For Protestants there are not two streams by which Christian revelation has come to us; there is but one — Holy Scripture ... It is precisely here the issue is joined, not at all in the denial of a protestant tradition and of its potent and beneficent influence."*

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