

Are We At the End of the Reformation?

Part One: The End of *Sola Scriptura* —"By Scripture Alone"

Peter Ditzel

Most scholars date the start of the Protestant Reformation to October 31, 1517, when the Roman Catholic Augustinian monk and priest, Martin Luther (1483–1546) nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of All Saints' Church, often called "Castle Church," in Wittenberg, Germany. But as the ball of the Reformation got rolling, the importance of the Ninety-five Theses faded in comparison to other fundamental tenets of belief that arose as the central differences between Catholics and Protestants. Five of the central beliefs took expression in what have been called the Five Solas: 1. *Sola Scriptura*—"By Scripture Alone," 2. *Sola fide*—"by faith alone," 3. *Sola gratia*—"by grace alone," 4. *Solus Christus* or *Solo Christo*—"Christ alone" or "through Christ alone," 5. *Soli Deo Gloria*—"glory to God alone."

As might be expected given enough time, over the years individuals and individual churches have wandered from the Five Solas. In fact, the true intent of *sola scriptura* was given up by many Protestants very early on. It may have been only the influence of the Radical Reformers—those who generally stood against the concept of a state church and for a church of baptized believers separate from the state—and their descendents that kept the spirit of *sola scriptura* alive and brought about a renewed interest in it among some denominations. But, on the whole, there has been a slow and subtle subversion of the meaning of the Five Solas and other biblical teachings that has spread through churches and seminaries. This has led us to where, today, we are on what appears to be the verge of a crumbling away of Protestantism and a return to Catholicism.

This return to Catholicism is happening both directly and indirectly. By "directly," I refer to individuals and even entire congregations converting to Roman Catholicism (there have also been many conversions to the Eastern Orthodox Church). By "indirectly," I mean a drift away from the Five Solas and other Bible teachings by churches and Bible teachers who continue to call themselves Protestant and even consider themselves theologically conservative, without realizing that what they now teach is closer to Catholicism than to Protestantism. In this series of articles, I will clarify the teachings of each of the Five Solas and explain how they do not match what is now commonly believed in many Protestant, Reformed, or Baptist churches.

Sola scriptura is the teaching that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and the only authoritative revelation of God. What we believe, what we obey, and what we know about God, His Son, His plan for humanity, and all other knowledge about our salvation and walk as Christians, we are to obtain from the Bible. Even what we believe about anything else, such as origins, the nature of the universe, history, and science,

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must never contradict what is found in the Bible, as we are to regard the Bible as the foundation and test of all truth.

Further, this teaching says that the Bible can be understood by each Christian individually because the Bible interprets itself. It is the way by which God reveals Himself to us individually. The Bible does not need any outside confirmation or verification, and it does not need the approval or interpretation of any person or persons. It is a self-contained body of truth. God's revelation to us today is solely within the Bible and has not continued and does not continue today in any other body of oral or written or living tradition. This teaching wholly contradicts and nowhere agrees with Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Coptic, and other belief systems that aver that the Bible can be correctly understood only as interpreted by apostolic or sacred or holy Tradition. Thus, it is also in complete contradiction with the Roman Catholic Church's assertion that only the Pope and the bishops in communion with him—referred to as "the Magisterium of the Church"—can authentically interpret the Word of God.

Today, we might see *sola scriptura* as absolutely foundational to what might be called Protestant thought and doctrine. But the truth is that *sola scriptura* was never fully put into practice in the Magisterial Reformation. The Magisterial Reformation refers to that branch of the Reformation typified by such leaders as Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. The Magisterial Reformation leaders swayed certain regions of Europe to break from the Roman Catholic Church. They also formulated many of the doctrines we associate with Protestantism. But they did not break with all of Catholic thought.

Notably, while the Magisterial Reformers rejected the authority of the pope, they did not reject the idea of a close interrelationship between church and state. The churches they ran essentially took on the same relationship with the Protestant states that the Roman Catholic Church had had with those states before the Reformation. Additionally, while they may have given lip service to such ideas as the priesthood of all believers, in practice the Magisterial Reformers maintained the Catholic idea of a very sharp distinction between clergy and laity.

Both of these ideas—the tie between church and state, and the distinction between clergy and laity—worked together to essentially render impotent any practical benefit of the teaching of *sola scriptura*. What I mean by this is that the Magisterial Reformers set themselves and their clergy up as the interpreters of Scripture and enforced that

interpretation with the sword of the magistrates. Those who truly tried to live by *sola scriptura* in the Protestant states could find themselves in very big trouble, and many were even executed for their beliefs. Because of this, critics charged the Magisterial Reformers with getting rid of the pope so they could set themselves up as mini-popes.

Those who tried to truly live by *sola scriptura*, defying both the pope and the Magisterial Reformers in the process, were called the Radical Reformers. For their attempts to put *sola scriptura* and the priesthood of all believers into practice, and for believing in the separation of church and state, they were severely persecuted. Yet, it was their influence, more than any other influence, that led to the First Amendment freedoms enjoyed in the United States today. That influence reached this continent through the Anabaptists, Baptists, and other minority religious groups that fled Europe to find religious freedom in America. At first, they ran up against persecution from the American heirs of the Magisterial Reformers—the Puritans, Presbyterians, and Anglicans. But havens of freedom sprang up in the colonies of Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. The idea of true liberty of conscience in religion was advocated in the seventeenth century in the writings of Roger Williams. In the eighteenth century, this idea fell on the sympathetic ears of the founding fathers, some of whom were Deists, Universalists, or Quakers, and, therefore, also had a personal interest in religious freedom.

Today, *sola scriptura* has all but been squeezed out of the institutional churches. It is looked upon as an important principle and a rallying cry of the Reformation. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the Lutheran, Reformed, and Presbyterian churches, descended as they are from the Magisterial Reformation, never did really put it into practice. Chances are that if you ask the pastor of one of these churches a doctrinal question, he will answer you with a reference to a creed or confession instead of with a Scripture. Too often, Scripture is made to fit the mold of the interpretation imposed on it by the creed or confession, rather than the confession being viewed as merely a statement of belief written by fallible humans.

There are even Reformed writers who are denying that *sola scriptura* was ever intended to mean that the Bible is the sole basis of authority. Claiming to adhere to the true meaning of *sola scriptura*, while really echoing the same arguments that Catholics have always used against *sola scriptura*, they say that *sola scriptura* really means Scripture plus tradition, ecumenical creeds, and church authority.

One Reformed writer says that understanding *sola scriptura* to mean taking the Bible as the sole basis of authority results in autonomy, with the individual becoming the sole basis of authority. He likens this to the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox positions, which result in the autonomy of the church. But this is a specious argument because, quite obviously, authority must rest somewhere. Saying that tradition, ecumenical creeds, and church authority must all be consulted as authorities does not solve the dilemma. Someone or something must still be looked upon as the final arbiter. Unfortunately, if that final authority is not the Bible alone, then it will be what tradition says or what the creeds say or what the church says. That is not *sola scriptura*. (For an example of a Reformed argument against *sola scriptura*, see "A Critique of the Evangelical Doctrine of Sola Scriptura" by Keith Mathison, *Reformed Perspectives Magazine*, Volume 9, Number 15, April 8 to April 14, 2007, http://www.thirdmill.org/newfiles/kei_mathison/kei_mathison.critiquesolascriptura.html.)

Of course, the question arises, if you read a Scripture and say it means one thing, and I read a Scripture and say it means something else, who decides who is right? First, we must understand that it may be that neither one of us is right. Next, we must understand that, totally apart from you and me, the Bible is right. We may not understand it, but we should at least know that it is right.

If we were still living in apostolic times, the question could be resolved by an apostle. God used the apostles to put doctrine into the church and their decision on a matter was to be accepted as authoritative. But we are not in apostolic times, and God left no one else—including elders and pastors—in such a position. The apostle Paul, suspecting that his arrest and eventual execution were drawing near, left these instructions: "And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified" (Act 20:32). The authority that Paul left behind was not a man or men. It was not the Pope and the bishops in communion with him ("the Magisterium of the Church"). It was not a pastor. It was not a church board. It was not even the entire congregation of a church. It was the "the word of his grace," which we have preserved for us today in the Bible. God puts no man, body of men, or sayings or writings of men in a position today to authoritatively pronounce on the Bible.

I suppose that it is possible that the way I write may sound like I am putting myself into a position of authority. But I trust that you know better than that. I have adopted this style, as have many others, because I think that if I said, "I think it might be this way, but it could

be that way, and, on the other hand, we should consider this other opinion," you would soon be bored. Also, I hope that what I say will challenge you to be as the Bereans, "who received the word with all readiness, each day examining the Scriptures to see whether these things might be so" (Acts 17:10). But there must never be a "thus saith Peter Ditzel," or "thus saith the pope," or "thus saith the pastor," or "thus saith the church board," or "thus saith the congregation" when it comes to interpreting the Word of God.

So, how do we resolve a difference of opinion over the meaning of a Scripture? Amicably, if at all possible. We should find up to what point we do agree, and then search the Scriptures from there and try to work out the difference. If we still cannot agree, we need to determine whether we can still fellowship or whether our differences will be too offensive to one another. If the latter is true, we should still depart peacefully.

I am not saying that it is wrong for a church to say, This is what we believe. I am saying that it is wrong for a church or a man to say, Our or my understanding of the Bible must be right and God is not pleased or does not approve if you disagree. No one person or body of persons has that authority today.

A statement of faith, if we want to have one, should merely summarize what we believe about the Bible. To repeat what I said in an article about the Bible alone several years ago, "But problems arise when these works of men are used to bind people's consciences or as the authority upon which to base a charge of false teaching or wrong practice against someone. Only the Bible can be that authority. Through the centuries, those who tried to remain faithful to Scripture according to their consciences were often banished, scourged, drowned, burned at the stake, or tortured on the rack by those who were blindly following the traditions, creeds, and confessions of a church. Confessions must never have sway over a believer's conscience. First Peter 2:9 calls all believers a 'royal priesthood.' The description does not belong only to those who formulate confessions. We must respect the priesthood of all believers, including their right to interpret Scripture as they are guided by the Holy Spirit, not as they are dictated to by a confession" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/biblealone.pdf>).

What it comes down to is trusting that God knows how to deal with each of His saints as He sees fit. He has equipped them with His Spirit and His Word. Sure, they may make mistakes. We may in brotherly love tell them where we think they have erred. But God has not put us

in a position to condemn anyone whose beliefs differ from ours. Those who want to water *sola scriptura* down to mean by Scripture as interpreted by tradition or the church or the creeds or the pastor or anyone or anything else are not grasping the significance of what God is doing under the New Covenant. Jesus Christ has opened the way for each believer to have a direct relationship with God. The New Covenant is a time of maturity. Yes, God has gifted some to teach. And each of us should be able to advise when consulted. But no person or persons have the authority to impose a supposedly authentic interpretation of Scripture on anyone. Each believer is a priest, who can communicate directly with God both in prayer and in reading what God says to him "by Scripture alone"—*sola scriptura*. Keep *sola scriptura* alive in your walk with God even if the Protestant institutions are crumbling.