

SOLA SCRIPTURA

Of all our slogans this is perhaps the most cited in Protestantism generally. It is also the most problematic of our collection; indeed, in my judgment, it cannot finally be salvaged for any significant use. The possibility — and perhaps inevitability — of abuse is provided by the *sola*, and I will spend most of this chapter on it. But first a few paragraphs on “*scriptura*,” to avoid unnecessary difficulties.⁹²

The *concept* of scripture emerges within Judaism’s and Christianity’s tradition of reflection, but the phenomenon it categorizes is all but universal. A definition of “scripture” is therefore more a matter of the phenomenology of religion than of Christian theology strictly so called. Let me venture into that realm: scripture is text that is vital for the perdurance of some community of the sort which modernity calls religious,⁹³ and which to that end is inscribed in a medium that gives the text itself perdurance — which may be anything from stone monuments to codices to trained memories.

92. To the following at length, Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Westminster John Knox, 2010)

93. “Religion” as a category is decidedly a modern invention. In Britain, it was devised to cover “not science.” In Germany, it appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as part of renascent theology’s reconstructive program.

The manner in which scriptures are vital for their communities varies greatly. The Vedas, e.g., consist mostly of rubrics and texts for rituals that have not been performed for many centuries. Thus it is not what outsiders might consider the meaning of these texts that is vital for Brahmanism, but rather their sheer experienced existence as links to the Aryan beginning. At the opposite end of a spectrum, determining the exact semantic field of every jot and tittle of Hebrew Scripture is the very life of orthodox rabbinic Judaism.

It is this variability we need to consider, to avoid confusion about also the “scripture” part of our slogan. For the Christian Scripture comes in two volumes which are not in the same way vital for the Christian church. Indeed, by the strictest acceptance of our definition, only Israel’s Scripture, the “Old Testament,” would be the church’s scripture, since the church in fact perished for over a century without a New Testament.⁹⁴

Israel’s Scripture is a sheer given for the church. The church never adopted or accepted Israel’s Scripture; rather Israel’s Scripture founded the church. Israel’s Scripture was authoritative for the first witnesses of the Resurrection before this event intruded into their lives and independently of their faith in it. Indeed, their ability to know the Resurrection for what it was depended on their prior life in the Scripture. Thus their preaching of the gospel consisted in mutual interpretation of Israel’s Scripture and what they had “seen and heard” of

94. Discussion of the reversal of this order by the liberal theology of the late 19th and early 20th centuries would take us beyond the bounds of this essay. That liberal theology was in part driven by explicit anti-semitism is part of the story.

95. I cannot resist harping on a favorite note: the habit of preaching almost always on a Gospel reading, is not faithful to the apostles.

Jesus.⁹⁵ There is no church without Israel's Scripture, without its presence in worship and preaching and devotion and theological or ethical argument.

On the other hand, the New Testament emerged at a specific moment in the history of the church, in response to a specific need — to which see the discussion in an earlier chapter. When the church found herself bereft of her apostles, she was led — or so she has believed — by the Spirit to gather those literary relics of the apostolic age in which she could recognize the authentic apostolic witness. As Luther put it, the New Testament is a providential substitute for being able directly to hear or query a living apostle.

We turn then to the problems with the *sola*, with “only Scripture.” I have two sets in mind.

The first: “only” is obviously supposed to exclude something, but what is that something? As we recite the slogan, it seems as if that might be obvious, but so soon as we pause for questions, we find that it is not. Various possibilities have presented themselves.

Perhaps the most obviously disastrous use of the slogan, is by those who claim to need no creed because they have Scripture. From the first Catholics asked, “*Only* Scripture? And not at least the creeds?” To which the churches of the more magisterial Reformation have responded, “Well. No. We don't mean that.” “So what *do* you mean?” We have often tried to rescue the creeds from the *sola* by saying that they are summaries of Scripture, which they plainly are not, since they leave most of Scripture out altogether, skipping straight from Creation to Jesus' birth and from his birth to his death. And on the other hand it is amazing how rigidly faithful to what is in fact creedal teaching groups who say they have no creeds often are, allowing less nuance than do those who recite the creed every Sunday.

Sometimes the slogan is used to exclude supposedly rival agents of churchly authority. For some Protestants, governance by bishops or functionally equivalent office-holders is the paradigmatic case of what *sola scriptura* excludes.

The problem with this use of the slogan is that, as we earlier noted, the canon of the New Testament and the establishment of the episcopate emerged in the church at much the same time and in joint answer to the same crisis. Indeed the episcopate was there a little earlier, so that it was an episcopally governed church that acknowledged the canon. Why then the one and not the other? If the New Testament was a gift of the Spirit in a crucial time, why not the episcopate that received the gift? Use of *sola scriptura* to support a general denial of the church's ancient governance is an obvious abuse — which is not to say that churches not now episcopally governed must forthwith abandon their present structures.

Another possibility: it is widely supposed that the slogan affirms Scripture and denigrates “tradition.” Thus the Council of Trent’s formula of “Scripture and/or tradition” has been the target of Protestant polemics for centuries. The difficulty is that most of the books that make up the canon themselves came to pass by lengthy processes of community tradition, first of oral tradition and then of glossing, supplementing and editing texts. The documents’ selecting and collection into volumes understood as Scripture came similarly to pass. If we have no confidence in tradition under the leading of the Spirit, we can have no confidence in supposedly inspired Scripture. Moreover, there was no New Testament for the first 150 years of the church; thus the rule that the writings there collected are authoritative for the life of the church is itself a pure piece of churchly tradition.

The use of *sola scriptura* to enforce “not tradition” is thus a mere oxymoron, but for all that has done widespread damage in the life of the Protestant churches, fostering the delusion that we could ignore the centuries of theological reflection and debate that actually join us to the primal church, without loss of access to Scripture itself. The church received the New Testament as a controlling *part of* her tradition, not as a substitute for it.

The use of the slogan that is perhaps closest to its actual role in Reformation polemics is directed against any finally decisive *magisterium*, any final teaching authority in matters, as it is often put, which are “necessary to salvation.” There is to be no pastorate on the order of the papacy; only Scripture is to have such a role. This use is perhaps less immediately oxymoronic than the two just canvassed, but it too has its problems.

The difficulty is that Scripture is a book, and thus cannot itself exert its own authority; someone must do this. Who is that to be? Is every believer to be a *magister*, as some Protestantism supposes? If so, whom does he teach?

A decentralized magisterium is sometimes thought compatible with *sola Scriptura*; and much of Protestantism has experimented on those lines, with discouraging results. Some churches of the Reformation have treated their theological faculties as magisterial bodies; most have with good reason given this up. Nor have various episcopal or presbyteral groupings been notably successful in guarding unity of teaching or practice.

And then we must ask: Who after all carried the Reformation itself? In part of Scandinavia, it was the archbishops acting unilaterally, as something like infallible regional popes. On the continent, there was a shaky alliance of university theologians and princes, the latter very much with their own agendas. In England, the mon-

arch took over directly as arbiter of theological disputes. To continue with this experiment against the evidence of its results, in the name of “only Scripture,” is surely an abuse.

This again is not to say that Protestantism can immediately return to the papal magisterium. The ecumenical movement has labored for the renewed unity of the church for half a century, with limited result. It is only to say that use of “only Scripture” to cover the disasters of Protestantism’s lack of a magisterium is an abuse.

So to the second question about the *sola*: What is it that only Scripture is supposed to do? As earlier discussed, we have often taken *sola scriptura* as a unit with *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Then it appears that Scripture must justify or save, since that is what faith and grace do. But that cannot be right. Islam indeed holds that the savior is a book, indeed a book that was in the beginning with God, but that is precisely one of the points that led Christian theology to classify Islam as a Christian heresy, since the Word which is in the beginning with a personal God must just so be personal. We are not justified or saved by believing the Bible.

We are, however, better off with this second question than we were with the first. The next generation of Lutheran theologians after the Reformers, the so-called Lutheran scholastics, developed a teaching that has much to recommend it.⁹⁶ These theologians distinguished two things that only Scripture does.

In one role, as liturgically read in the churches and as pervading the liturgy and read for devotion, Scripture is itself a living voice of the gospel and has the living gospel’s power to awaken faith. And “only” is here

96. To this, see Carl Heinz Ratschow, *Lutherische Dogmatik zwischen Reformation und Aufklärung* (Gütersloh: 1964-), I:71-132.

in a way appropriate, since without Scripture there would now be no living word at all.

Scripture's other role, according to these old Lutherans, is legal: in doctrinal and ethical argument it is the *norma normans non normata*, the "norm which norms and is not normed," the authority which cannot be trumped. This does not necessarily mean that all theological arguments must be directly derivable from Scripture, only that they must not deliver results contrary to Scripture.

If there is a legitimate reading of *sola* in *sola Scriptura* I think it is the Old Lutheran reading. But in my judgment we might better do without the slogan, and simply say what the old Lutherans said materially: on the one hand we should hearken to Scripture as living law and gospel, and privilege its verbal presence in the church so that it is there to be heard; and on the other hand, when in doubt about moral or theological questions, recur to Scripture as the last authority. The "only" adds nothing that needs to be added.