

Understanding Sola Scriptura

By Michael Kruger of Ligonier Ministries

We live in a world filled with competing truth claims. Every day, we are bombarded with declarations that something is true and that something else is false. We are told what to believe and what not to believe. We are asked to behave one way but not another way. In her monthly column “What I Know for Sure,” Oprah Winfrey tells us how to handle our lives and our relationships. The New York Times editorial page regularly tells us what approach we should take to the big moral, legal, or public-policy issues of our day. Richard Dawkins, the British atheist and evolutionist, tells us how to think of our historical origins and our place in this universe.

How do we sift through all these claims? How do people know what to think about relationships, morality, God, the origins of the universe, and many other important questions? To answer such questions, people need some sort of norm, standard, or criteria to which they can appeal. In other words, we need an ultimate authority. Of course, everyone has some sort of ultimate norm to which they appeal, whether or not they are aware of what their norm happens to be. Some people appeal to reason and logic to adjudicate competing truth claims. Others appeal to sense experience. Still others refer to themselves and their own subjective sense of things. Although there is some truth in each of these approaches, Christians have historically rejected all of them as the ultimate standard for knowledge. Instead, God’s people have universally affirmed that there is only one thing that can legitimately function as the supreme standard: God’s Word. There can be no higher authority than God Himself.

Of course, we are not the first generation of people to face the challenge of competing truth claims. In fact, Adam and Eve faced such a dilemma at the very beginning. God had clearly said to them “You shall surely die” if they were to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). On the other hand, the Serpent said the opposite to them: “You will not surely die” (3:4). How should Adam and Eve have adjudicated these competing claims? By empiricism? By rationalism? By what seemed right to them? No, there was only one standard to which they should have appealed to make this decision: the word that God had spoken to them. Unfortunately, this is not what happened. Instead of looking to God’s revelation, Eve decided to investigate things further herself: “When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes ... she took of its fruit and ate” (3:6). Make no mistake, the fall was not just a matter of Adam and Eve eating the fruit. At its core, the fall was about God’s people rejecting God’s Word as the ultimate standard for all of life.

But if God’s Word is the ultimate standard for all of life, the next question is critical: Where do we go to get God’s Word? Where can it be found? This issue, of course, brings us to one of the core debates of the Protestant Reformation. While the Roman Catholic Church authorities agreed that God’s Word was the ultimate standard for all of life and doctrine, they believed this Word could be found in places outside of the Scriptures. Rome claimed a trifold authority structure, which included Scripture, tradition, and the Magisterium. The key component in this trifold authority was the Magisterium itself, which is the authoritative teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church, manifested primarily in the pope. Because the pope was considered the successor of the Apostle Peter, his official pronouncements (*ex cathedra*) were regarded as the very words of God Himself.

It was at this point that the Reformers stood their ground. While acknowledging that God had delivered His Word to His people in a variety of ways before Christ (Heb. 1:1), they argued that we should no longer expect ongoing revelation now that God has spoken finally in His Son (v. 2). Scripture is clear that the Apostolic office was designed to perform a onetime, redemptive-historical task: to lay the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). The foundation-laying activity of the Apostles primarily consisted of giving the church a deposit of authoritative teaching testifying to and applying the great redemptive work of Christ. Thus, the New Testament writings, which are the permanent embodiment of this Apostolic teaching, should be seen as the final installment of God’s revelation to His people. These writings, together with the Old Testament, are the only ones that are rightly considered the Word of God.

This conviction of *sola Scriptura*—the Scriptures alone are the Word of God and, therefore, the only infallible rule for life and doctrine—provided the fuel needed to ignite the Reformation. Indeed, it was regarded as the “formal cause” of the Reformation (whereas *sola fide*, or “faith alone,” was regarded as the “material cause”). The sentiments of this doctrine are embodied in Martin Luther’s famous speech at the Diet of Worms (1521) after he was asked to recant his teachings:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.... May God help me. Amen. For Luther, the Scriptures, and the Scriptures alone, were the final arbiter of what we should believe.

Of course, like many core Christian convictions, the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* has often been misunderstood and misapplied. Unfortunately, some have used *sola Scriptura* as a justification for a “me, God, and the Bible” type of individualism, where the church bears no real authority and the history of the church is not considered when interpreting and applying Scripture. Thus, many churches today are almost a historical—cut off entirely from the rich traditions, creeds, and confessions of the church. They misunderstand *sola Scriptura* to mean that the Bible is the only authority rather than understanding it to mean that the Bible is the only infallible authority. Ironically, such an individualistic approach actually undercuts the very doctrine of *sola Scriptura* it is intended to protect. By emphasizing the autonomy of the individual believer, one is left with only private, subjective conclusions about what Scripture means. It is not so much the authority of Scripture that is prized as the authority of the individual.

The Reformers would not have recognized such a distortion as their doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. On the contrary, they were quite keen to rely on the church fathers, church councils, and the creeds and confessions of the church. Such historical rootedness was viewed not only as a means for maintaining orthodoxy but also as a means for maintaining humility. Contrary to popular perceptions, the Reformers did not view themselves as coming up with something new. Rather, they understood themselves to be recovering something very old—something that the church had originally believed but later twisted and distorted. The Reformers were not innovators but were excavators.

There are other extremes against which the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* protects us. While we certainly want to avoid the individualistic and a historical posture of many churches today, *sola Scriptura* also protects us from overcorrecting and raising creeds and confessions or other human documents (or ideas) to the level of Scripture. We must always be on guard against making the same mistake as Rome and embracing what we might call “traditionalism,” which attempts to bind the consciences of Christians in areas that the Bible does not. In this sense, *sola Scriptura* is a guardian of Christian liberty. But the biggest danger we face when it comes to *sola Scriptura* is not misunderstanding it. The biggest danger is forgetting it. We are prone to think of this doctrine purely in terms of sixteenth-century debates—just a vestige of the age-old Catholic-Protestant battles and irrelevant for the modern day. But the Protestant church in the modern day needs this doctrine now more than ever. The lessons of the Reformation have been largely forgotten, and the church, once again, has begun to rely on ultimate authorities outside of Scripture.

In order to lead the church back to *sola Scriptura*, we must realize that we cannot do so only by teaching about the doctrine itself (although we must do this). Instead, the primary way we lead the church back is by actually preaching the Scriptures. Only the Word of God has the power to transform and reform our churches. So, we should not only talk about *sola Scriptura*, but we should demonstrate it. And when we do, we must preach all of God’s Word—not picking and choosing the parts we prefer or think our congregations want to hear. We must preach only the Word (*sola Scriptura*), and we must preach all the Word (*tota Scriptura*). The two go hand in hand. When they are joined together in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can have hope for a new reformation.