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## The Concept of Sola Scriptura and its Usefulness on Contemporary Theology: A Historical Study

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### Abstract

The concept "Sola Scriptura" is one of the controversial issues in the Bible. The issue has received different views from Biblical scholars. Some scholars had argued that Sola Scriptura referred to Bible alone while others alluded to Roman Catholics' tradition, magisterium and Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The paper is therefore motivated by these questions, does the Scripture only the truly and divinely book in the world? Is the Scripture authoritative book? How can Scripture its own interpreter? The paper will aid readers, Christians and non-Christians at large to know that Scripture is divine and inspired book from God. Again, the paper positively affirmed that Scripture is authoritative, sufficient, infallible and its own interpreter than any other book in the world.

**Keywords:** Sola Scriptura, Usefulness, Contemporary Theology, Christian, History

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate sola scriptura and its usefulness to contemporary theology.

The phrase "Sola Scriptura" comes from two Latin words sola and scriptura. The "sola" means "alone, ground, base and" scriptura" implies writings". Therefore, Sola Scriptura refers to the Scripture alone. This signifies that Scripture alone is the authoritative and authenticity for the Christian faith and practice. James White", Scripture Alone", accessed 14 August 2015. For instance, in 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul suggests that "all Scripture is God breathed and it is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (Holy Bible, NKJV). New King James Version, the Holy Bible (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 1178.

Sola Scriptura was the protestant reformation concept. For centuries, Roman Catholic Church made traditions superior to the Bible." Sola Scriptura" gives a solid foundation on Biblical truth. Surprising enough, Roman Catholic Church argued strongly that Sola Scriptura is based on traditions and hence it cannot be only source of truth. C.E.Earle, Christianity through Centuries, 23rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 284.

Thus, the frequent objection by Roman Catholic Church is the fact that the canon of the Bible was not officially agreed upon for least 250 years after the Church was established. Another hot argument by Roman Catholic Church is that the Bible did not reach the masses for over 1500 years after the inception of the Church. The questions raise therefore are that, how were the early Christian used Sola Scriptura and when was the scripture was not in full swing?" M Abbott, the Documents of Vatican, 2nd ed. (New York: Herden Press, 1996), 116.

In Protestants point of view, Sola Scriptura points back to what God revealed to humankind in his word. It ultimately refers back to God who always speaks the truth, never contradicts Himself. In addition, God proves Himself dependable, and even His words that is Scripture. Ibid, 118.

### The Concept "Sola Scriptura"

Sola Scriptura is the protestant Christian doctrine that the Bible is the supreme authority in all matters of doctrine and practice. Sola Scriptura does not deny other authorities govern

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Christian life and devotion but sees them as subordinate to be corrected by the written word of God. M. Luther, the Table Talk (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 15.

It is the teaching that Scriptures contain all that is necessary for salvation and proper living before God. It means that Scriptures both Old and New Testaments are the final authority but not traditions and past Church councils and magisterium. For instance, traditions, magisterium, past Church councils, commentaries and opinions of others are in Churches, but Bible is the final authority and authenticity. Ibid, 18. Apostle Paul proposes in 1 Timothy 3:14-15 that this writing is good for hope, joy, truth, behavior and how to live in God (Holy Bible, NKJV).

It is a formal principle of many protestant Christian denominations and one of the five solas. It was a foundational doctrinal principle of the protestant reformation held by the reformers. The protestant reformers taught that the discernable excellence of the text as well as the personal witness of the Holy Spirit to the heart of each man governed the authentication of Scripture. <sup>1</sup> D. W Robertson, Christian Doctrine (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), 11.

The Evangelical and Baptist denominations state that the doctrine of Sola Scriptura is more strongly Bible's own interpreter and sufficient of itself to be the final authority of Christian doctrine. Thus, the Biblical hermeneutical process should do the interpretation of Scriptures<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 15.

The reformers' principle of Sola Scriptura concerns about the sufficiency of Scripture as a supreme authority in all Scriptural matters, but not scientific truth. It also implies that all truth necessary for our salvation and spiritual life taught either explicitly or implicitly in Scripture. <sup>1</sup> M.Luther, the Bondage of the Will (Grand Rapids: Fleming Revel, 1975), 319. The question then asked is, does Sola Scriptura claim that everything Jesus or apostles ever taught is preserved in Scripture? Here, Peter suggest in 2 Peter 1:3 that "everything necessary, everything binding, on our consciences and everything God requires of us is given to us in Scripture" (Holy Bible, NKJV) Scripture is therefore perfect and only standard of spiritual truth for revealing infallibility and salvation<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 322.

Against this background, Anglican and Methodist Church considered Protestantism as upholding the doctrine of "Prima Scriptura". The implication here is that Scripture is sacred which is illumined by tradition, reason and experience. That is Anglican formula and Wesleyan quadrilateral theological method <sup>1</sup> Ibid., 325.

Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy great America political heroes once said, "It seems equally absurd for a Christian to accomplish without knowing what Christianity meant throughout the shared Christian history. However, the Protestants moved the central role of Scripture for the Christian identity. Thus, the idea became overwhelmingly bright that "the humble lamp" the Christian fathers had been misplaced by and then subsequently forgotten <sup>1</sup> J.G.Rupert, The Meaning of Tradition (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1996), 16.

Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran Church and the father of the protestant reformation rebuked Catholic Church for its unbiblical teachings. On the strength of this, Luther was threatened and excommunicated from Catholic Church. The Catholic argument against Sola Scriptura is that the Bible does not explicitly teach Sola Scriptura that is the Bible only. Catholics argue that it is never found

anywhere that the Bible is only authoritative guide for faith and practice. <sup>1</sup> Luther, Commentary on Galatians (Grand Rapids: Fleming Revel, 1988), 15. For Catholics' perspective, the Bible is the word of God, inerrant and God-breathed, which does not change or contradict itself. Sola Scriptura is not as much as argument against tradition but it seeks truth for humanity. Surprising enough, Catholics know beyond the shadow of any doubt that Scripture is true, authoritative and reliable as in the case of tradition<sup>1</sup> Whitaker, A Disputation of Holy Spirit (Cambridge: University Press, 1849), 411.

Theologically speaking, the word of God is the only authoritative for Christian faith. Whereas traditions valid only when they base on scripture and careful agreement with Scripture. Therefore, traditions that contradict the Bible are not of God and invalid aspect of Christians' faith.

<sup>1</sup> R.H.Bainton, Here I Stand (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950), 83.

According to Roman Catholicism, sacred tradition together with the Bible provides the foundational of spiritual truth, but Protestants reject this view by replacing Sola Scriptura. Again, if Bible has not used to verify and test sacred tradition, then sacred tradition is functionally independent of the word of God. If tradition is not dependent on Scripture, then by what right does Scripture exist as an authoritative? Hence, Roman Catholics assume that tradition is equivalent to the Scripture. They are also in the view that Bible is derived from sacred tradition. <sup>1</sup> K. Barr, Escaping from Fundamentalism (London: SCM Press, 1984), 71.

In contrast, the New Testament authors regarded Bible as true and factual book with final authority. For instance, in Matthew 4 when Jesus Christ was tempted, He used the words in Scripture to refute the devil. Catholicism somewhere along the line emphatically declared that the Bible is superior to sacred tradition and therefore the lesser is blessed by the greater. However, if the Scripture has stated not to trust sacred tradition, then Roman Catholic sacred tradition is obviously invalid and fallacious. <sup>1</sup> H.M.Gwatkin, Medieval Church History (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 27.

### Evaluation of Sola Scriptura

Many great theological scholars have aired their views on the concept Sola Scriptura in diverse ways. Some of these ways are:

The Evangelical and Catholic scholars began putting great emphasis on the consensus and authority of Christian tradition at the expense of the scripture. To them tradition is the fundamental among all the Christians' practices, hence Scripture alone cannot be the final authority in Christendom<sup>1</sup> P V. Bemmelen, Revelation and Inspiration: Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 52.

Here, Evangelical studies converge with non-evangelical studies in several ways. Van Bemmelen and Goldsworthy therefore, underline the fact resurgence of the Evangelical understanding of tradition and consequently restrictions of the principle by Scripture alone. <sup>1</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, Gospel Centered Hermeneutics (Downers: Academic Press, 2007), 191.

John Wesley (1703-1791), father of Methodism, believed that the pathway to spiritual truth was threefold namely; reason, experience and Scripture. <sup>1</sup> George A. Turner,

Inspiration and Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 156. The conventional Wesleyan quadrilateral apparently includes tradition as well which the experience is indeed of “historical consciousness” of the community of faith. As a continuation of Protestant Orthodoxy, it seems clear that Methodism drifted from the original reformers by Scripture only. Here, tradition, reason and experience played equal roles in the theological and spiritual search for the ultimate truth of the word of God.<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 175.

In this historical context, it appears that this broadening of the Scripture principle brought a new understanding of revelation and the word of God in general, as well as the endorsement of “Prima Scriptura principle”.<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 178. With this, a new spiritual and theological understanding, this is termed as revelation.<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 187. Therefore, Scripture ceased to be the only focal element of God’s revelatory activity as emphasized by Neo-Orthodox theological method.<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 189.

Emile Brunner, the 20<sup>th</sup> century neo-orthodox theologian affirmed that the idea whereby “the word of God was equated to the words of Scripture went back to a late Jewish innovation.”<sup>1</sup> Emile Brunner quoted in Paul King Jewett, *Doctrine of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 212. The Bible is human’s word about God, not God Himself as He confronts us in Christ, His transcended word, Brunner said.<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 158. It is impersonal objective revelation and “abyss” between human’s words and God’s words.<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 162. Thus, the Bible is “human historical word about the divine personal word”<sup>1</sup> Ibid, 168. and in the light of this it indicates inadequacy and fallibility of all that is human.<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 171.

Again, from neo-orthodox point of view, Scripture represents human’s testimony about God, which is a revelation and continuously subjective experience, not objective.<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 173. Brunner on the other hand classified the Bible as the propositional nature of revelation and the non-identity of God’s word.<sup>1</sup> Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 81.

Consequently, the neo-orthodox theologians confirmed that “Jesus Himself is the only ultimate revelation of God and personal word of God; hence only true meaning of the Scripture”.<sup>1</sup> Emile Brunner, *The Word of God and Modern Man* (London: James Clarke, 1960), 23. From Brunner, the Bible is not the basis of Christians’ faith, because it is the word of God to humanity in the moment of revelation.”<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Paul King Jewett, *Brunner’s Doctrine of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 219. However, when man becomes contemporaneous with Christ through instrumental authority, then man is closely related to historical encounter”.<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 220.

Brunner’s position of theology changed from the perspective of traditional Protestantism to God revealing Himself outside the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Emile Brunner, *The Philosophy of Religion* (London: James Clark, 1960), 237. The teachings of Brunner made the Scripture limited and unauthentic.<sup>1</sup> Jewett, 237. Apparently, Joseph Ratzinger shared the neo-orthodox position on God’s revelation as a valuable ecumenical input about Jesus Christ as the ultimate and personal word of God that validates and objects the witness of the Scripture and gives meaning to the proclaimed word.<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of the Fathers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 34.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, a notable contemporary German theologian strongly emphasized that the Bible cannot be a deposit of divine revelation and hence the Bible is the sourcebook of a specific tradition in relation to history of religions.<sup>1</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: Clark Press, 1936), 136. As a result, the doctrine of Scripture can no longer be the foundation of theological reflection. Thus, the authority of the Scripture is the goal and not the presupposition of theology but exclusive deposit involving non-inclusive part of God’s revelation.<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 138.

C.S Lewis, the 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian stressed, “he did not see Scripture as God’s word proper but rather the “vehicle” that has been chosen and elevated above itself for this calling.”<sup>1</sup> Grenz and Olson, 196. The modern Evangelicalism adhered to the modification of the Scripture principle, a curtailing of the Sola Scriptura that equated to the general revelation of the word of God.<sup>1</sup> Lewis C S and Francis S., *Influential Apologist of our Time* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1998), 127.

Evangelicalisms have wrong attitude towards the authoritative and authenticity of Scripture as one and only among all books.<sup>1</sup> Corley and Bruce, *Interpreting Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002), 189. The issue of revelation and inspiration assumed do not define the Sola Scriptura because those who have high view of Scripture still do not side with the Sola Scriptura and follow tradition.<sup>1</sup> J. Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 71.

The postmodern theologian Clark Pinnock disclosed, that the Bible is not a self-sufficient set of proposition but the means of grace by which God is able to speak to us in new ways.”<sup>1</sup> Clark, *The Scripture Principle* (Vancouver, CA: Regent College, 2002), 13. Pinnock did not speak only about contextualization or Calvin’s “accommodation principle.” As postmodernist, he talked about multiple meanings of written revelation in different circumstances regarding to Scripture. He consequently affirmed that Scripture is just a part of tradition without its proper sense<sup>1</sup> Ibid, 18.

Donald Bloesch, a notable Evangelical scholar indicated that by rediscovering the transcendence and dynamism of divine revelation and Scripture, both Catholics and Protestants had come to a new understanding of the relationship between Church tradition and Scripture, this issue might indeed become possible that Bible is like tradition.<sup>1</sup> J. Waterworth, *The Council of Trent* (London: Dolman Hanover College, 1995), 4. Stanley J. Grenz, the 21<sup>st</sup> theologian also declared that the Scripture is the “community of faith” as the foundational principle occurred within the context of the community and the writings represent the self-understanding of the community in which they find themselves<sup>1</sup> P.V.Dei, *Dogmatic Constitution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 386.

Against this background, Sola Scriptura is the primary, absolute and sufficiency of the Scripture as the final written authority of God. The implication here is that Bible interprets itself without requiring any external book and authority.<sup>1</sup> Norman Geisler, *Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 178. Karl Barth, 20<sup>th</sup> century ecumenical theologian and philosopher, believed that the Bible was human testimony in which the voice of God heard and proclaimed in the Church.<sup>1</sup> P. Idem, *Doctrine of the Word of God* (United Kingdom: Clark Press, 1956), 462.

In as much as the Christians proclaim the words of the Bible in the Church it becomes the word of God in three ways namely; the word as revelation, proclaimed word and the written word. Barth emphatically confirmed that none of the words of the Bible should be treated in isolation and relegated to the background. <sup>1</sup> Ibid., 466. Since, the Bible is God's past revelation. Hence, by really attesting revelation the Bible becomes the word of God. Bruce McCormack, another 20<sup>th</sup> century great theologian asserted, "The Bible is the inspirational word of God in which Christ uses to perform miracles. <sup>1</sup> K. Barth, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 125.

Luther Barth positively affirmed that the Bible is the word of God as the genuine and supreme criterion of the proclamation and of dogmatic. <sup>1</sup> Ibid., 128. In ecumenical terms, Barth indicates the paradoxical tension between the authority of the meaning of the Scripture and the authority of the Church. Therefore, obedience to the word of God always comes first, because it is obedience to Christ as the revealed word of God, but this obedience is by its virtue of submission to the community that produced Scripture. Hence, Holy Scripture is the word of God to the Church. <sup>1</sup> K.A. Mathison, *the Shape of Sola Scriptura* (London: Canon Press, 2001), 97.

According to Millard Erickson, "God Himself is the ultimate authority in religious matters. He has the right by virtue of both who he is and what he does to establish the standard for belief and practice. In respect to major issues, he does not exercise authority in a direct function, but rather he has delegated that authority by creating a book called Bible. Because, the Bible conveys God's message, it also carries the same weight God Himself would command if He was speaking to us personally. <sup>1</sup> Ibid., 101.

Erickson unequivocally expressed that the basis of the origin and authority of the Scripture which maintains its position of understanding and knowing the Scripture. Carl Henry, the 21<sup>st</sup> century theologian affirmed strongly that revelation and Scripture can be used simultaneously. <sup>1</sup> Ibid., 123. When Christians speak of the word of God, it designates not only the "rhema theou", spoken and written word of God in the grammatical sense, but also "logos theou", the personal word, or the speaking logos, the agent in creation and the supreme revelation of God incarnate.

From Karl Barth, the Bible is the infallible living God Himself and His word that remain forever and ever and judges all humankind. This shows that the Bible is the only Holy book humankind can rely on in our spiritual life. <sup>1</sup> Carl F.H, *Divine Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 258.

From the Adventist perspective, Ellen G. White declared that, the Holy Scripture is to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. Scripture is the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience (White, GC, vii). The implication here by E.G White is that the Bible is the standard by which all teachings and experience must be tested. She commented on "Christians' faith and morals that transform and guide by the Scripture to give humankind salvation in Christ Jesus. <sup>1</sup> C. Fernando, *Sola Scriptura and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Broadman, 2011), 28."

She emphatically stressed that even though Luther and Calvin supported tradition as Church practices, but she positioned herself and affirmed to Scripture and Scripture only <sup>1</sup> Ibid.

### Usefulness of Sola Scriptura

Sola Scriptura emphasizes on the Bible alone and rejects any tradition or teaching that is not in full agreement with the Bible. The implication here is that both Old and New Testaments are the final authority in all that they address.

Sola Scriptura is the source of truth for all the theological methods. Apostle Paul suggest in 2 Timothy 2:15 that "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth"( Holy Bible, NKJV).

It helps to do away all false theological teachings. The reason being that, Scripture and Scripture alone help theologians to acquire good teaching and preaching skills. By so doing, a clear meaning of a biblical text will ascertain. Here, people can learn the Bible and understand the meaning.

It also teaches the existing biblical revelation as the ultimate norm of faith and morals. Here, the words in Scripture teach right and wrong of an individual lifestyle. If such individuals obey the rules of Scripture, it helps to shape and transform their life.

Essentially enough, the study of Sola Scriptura enables theologians to be equipped in their hermeneutical interpretation. Here, the theologians get to know and understand the use of biblical language, historical background of a given society, the time of writing the text, the contextual usage and the application in our modern era. Finally, Sola Scriptura assists contemporary theologians to study and appreciate other theological methods such as Evangelical, Wesleyan quadrilateral, Neo-Orthodoxy, Postmodernism and others.

### Summary and Conclusion

In short, Scripture, heritage and culture are threefold interrelated single source of theology. They are inseparable. Thus, evangelicalism, Methodism and Neo-orthodoxy are firmly grounded in the tradition of the Church (Grenz and Olson, 1996). Early Protestant Reformers, Baptists and Adventists critically stressed on the Scripture and Scripture alone principle. To them Bible is the greatest light that directs all other smallest lights to correct interpretation and truth (Fernando Conale, 2011). With this Scripture as a spiritual instrument for the Church becomes fresh and new in every age.

The Sola Scriptura principle should not be undermined by reason, experience, and tradition of the community of faith. On the other hand, experience, reason and tradition somewhere along the line must be recognized to understand the particular group of people within a given community for correct interpretation of Scripture. Therefore, contemporary theologians can give correct interpretation to the Bible, only when we avail ourselves to Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus, the redeemer and the ultimate for our salvation.

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