Sola Scriptura

*Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture,
Authority, and Hermeneutics*

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The Problematic Character of *Sola Scriptura*¹

Henk van den Belt

Reflection on the authority of scripture should start with pure amazement about God's revelation. That God has spoken is the greatest thinkable miracle. He has spoken in the past at many times and in various ways. He has spoken to us by his Son, Jesus Christ. He still speaks today, applying the revealed Word to the hearts of believers through the Holy Spirit 'the Lord, the giver of life, who has spoken through the Prophets' (Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed). This amazement about God's revelation is nicely illustrated in a Hassidic story told by Martin Buber. Rabbi Israel Friedman of Ruzhyn (1796–1850), great grandchild of Maggid of Mezerich, one of the founding fathers of the Hassidic Jews, wrote:

All the pupils of my grandfather handed down his doctrines, except for one, rabbi Sussja. The reason was that he hardly followed one of the lectures of the maggid to the end. When at the beginning of a lecture the maggid cited the scripture that he wanted to comment on, and began with the words: 'and God said' or 'and God spoke' rabbi Sussja went into ecstasies, began to cry and move around so wild that others had to take him out of the classroom because of the disorder. There he stood in the corridor or striking the walls and shouting: 'And God spoke! God has spoken! Etc.' He continued until my grandfather stopped with his lesson and therefore he did not know the content. But says Israel of Rizhin, the truth is, that when one speaks the truth and someone listens in truth, one word is enough.²

This article argues that the well-known phrase *sola scriptura*, that has become a shorthand for the orthodox protestant view of the authority of scripture, is not very adequate to express that view. It first highlights the origin of the triad *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and then argues that the expression is problematic because of the relationship between scripture and tradition,

1 Some parts of this article have been published as Henk van den Belt, 'Sola Scriptura: An Inadequate Slogan for the Authority of Scripture' in *Calvin Theological Journal* 2016 (51), 204–226.

2 Martin Buber, *Schriften zum Chassidismus, Werke* (Munich: Kösel, 1963), 3: 356.

the indispensableness of hermeneutics, the importance of general revelation for the understanding of scripture, and the intrinsic relationship between the self-convincing nature of scripture as God's revelation and the witness of the Holy Spirit in the church in general and in the individual believers. Rather than from scripture alone, protestant theology should be developed from scripture as the primary and supreme authority, within the hermeneutical context of the confession of the Church of all ages, and in the acknowledgement that scripture as such is insufficient without the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit.

1 The Origin of the Triad

The so-called watchwords of the Reformation *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura* have become very common to designate the theological core of the Reformation. The triad—at the outset in the nominative *sola fides*, instead of *sola fide*³—became a fashionable expression only in 20th century. It was not used to typify the Reformation in the earlier centuries neither in the writings of the reformers themselves nor in those of protestant orthodoxy even though the expressions themselves do occur separately here in there in the millions of pages of Latin texts. Thus, the well-known triad is not much older than one hundred years.⁴

The precise origin of the triad is difficult to reconstruct, but as an indication of the core of Reformation thought it appears to have emerged only in scholarship shortly before the 1917 commemoration of the Reformation.⁵ It is possible that the triad owes its origins in the 19th century custom of speaking

3 It is not clear when the nominative *sola fides* was exactly exchanged for the ablative *sola fide*. In the earliest sources that could be traced for this article the expression is in the nominative. Later the ablative has often been emphasized for the correct understanding of the whole triad: through grace alone, though faith alone and through scripture alone.

4 Lane already argued that the slogan *sola scriptura* did not originate in the Reformation time, but he broadly connected it to the 'Post-Reformation' period. In his view what is meant by this slogan is the material sufficiency of scripture and formulated negatively "*sola Scriptura* is the statement that the church can err." Anthony N.S. Lane, 'Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan,' in *A pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. David. F. Wright and Philip Satterthwaite (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 324.

5 Research for this article focused on the use of *sola* in combination with *gratia*, *fide(s)* and *scriptura* in the following search engines: Googlebooks, Digibron, and Hathitrust. Titles were sought in WorldCat. More intensive research may deliver more information, but the triad appears in various contexts with respect to the 20th century commemoration of the Reformation.

about the Reformation in terms of central ideas (*Zentraldogmen*) or principles (*Prinzipien*). It is understandable that Lutherans chose *sola fide* as ‘watchword’ to describe the Reformation.⁶ From there on the word *sola* began to have a life of its own.

In the American context the triad emerged in the circles of radical Lutheranism. Theodore Engelder (1865–1949), professor at the orthodox Lutheran Missouri Synod Concordia Seminary, was one of the first to use it. He not only set Luther’s “uncompromising sola—nothings else than,” over against Rome, but also against “Zwingli and the other dreamers of dreams,” whom he describes as saying: “Our philosophy and our visions shall not and do not supplant, but only *interpret* Scripture. [...] But Luther would have none of it. He knew that, if it were not Scripture solely, it would not be Scripture at all.”⁷

Apparently, in the context of radical American Lutheranism the slogan functioned to underline the doctrine of the real bodily presence in the Lord’s Supper over against the Reformed ‘sophisticated’ interpretation of the literal words of Christ ‘This is my body.’ Another article in the same commemorative Lutheran volume explicitly uses *sola scriptura* to uphold Luther’s defense of consubstantiation at Magdeburg against the so-called rationalistic biblical interpretation of Zwingli. “At Marburg Luther once more ‘insisted upon blind and unquestioning submission to the Bible.’ At Marburg Luther once more

6 Thus, for example, Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: The History of Creeds* (New York: Harper, 1877), 626. Ebeling suggests that *sola scriptura* as formal principle originates in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gerhard Ebeling, “‘Sola Scriptura’ and Tradition,” in *The Word of God and Tradition: Historical Studies Interpreting the Divisions of Christianity*, trans. S. H. Hooke (London: Collins, 1968), 117.

7 The emphasis is Engelder’s. Theodore Engelder, “The Three Principles of the Reformation: Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides,” in *Four Hundred Years: Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and its Blessed Results, in the Year of the Four-hundredth Anniversary of the Reformation*, ed. W.H.T. Dau, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1916), 99. Jacob Corzine argues that, although *sola gratia* and *sola fide* have a long history in the Lutheran tradition, Engelder was the first to use the triad, and that *sola scriptura* is an orthodox Lutheran reaction against modern understanding of Scripture. Jacob Corzine, “The Source of the Solas: On the Question of Which are the Original Solas,” in *Theology is Eminently Practical: Essays in Honor of John T. Pless*, ed. Jacob Corzine and Bryan Wolfmueller (Fort Wayne: Lutheran Legacy, 2012), 67. Engelder was not the first to use the slogan in the American context. In 1912 H.H. Walker summarizes the position of C. F. W. Walther as “two cardinal principles: (1) the only source and rule of all doctrines are the Holy Scriptures; and (2) the grace of God alone saves us through faith in Jesus Christ:—Sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide,” H. H. Walker, “Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, D.D. The Luther of America,” in *The Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (1912): 358.

applied the formal principle of the Reformation—*Sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone.”⁸ In Lutheran circles in America the triad at that time apparently was already a noted expression.

In the Dutch context, one of the first to use the triad was Herman Bavinck, who at the occasion of the commemoration of the Reformation, said that the principle of the Reformation, “finds expression in a three-fold confession: *Scriptura sola*, *gratia sola*, *fides sola*, Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone. This was not a new principle, only the old Gospel.”⁹ Understood soteriologically the triad makes sense. Sinners can only be saved by grace, they can only accept this grace by faith, and they can only know this through scripture.

However, the *solas* are often understood as expressions for what the Reformation was historically against its medieval background. This expansion in usage of the *solas* to general Reformation principles poses a problem. The discussion about the exact relationship between scripture and tradition, between grace and merit, and between faith and works arises in the later polemics between protestants and the Roman Catholics. It is misleading to define the core of the Reformation itself from the point of later polemics.

Tridentine Roman Catholic theology can be typified by the Latin word *et*—and—in three areas: scripture and tradition, grace and merit, and faith and works. Whoever, then, characterizes the Reformation by the *sola*-triad, allows Tridentine theology to determine the agenda and ignores the fact that the Catholic theology of the Middle Ages was more nuanced and diverse than later Roman Catholicism. The triad erases the appreciation of the Reformation's catholicity. As a matter of fact, the Reformation did not reject tradition as such, but the idea that tradition was an extra-biblical source of revelation.

The same is true for *sola fide*; the slogan should not be detached from justification, as if it does not result in sanctification. As Bavinck wrote: “According to the Reformation it was a living faith that justified, *fides sola* but not *solitaria*.”¹⁰

8 Richard D. Biedermann, “Luther at Marburg,” in Dau, *Four Hundred Years*, 75.

9 Herman Bavinck, “De Hervorming en ons nationale leven,” in *Ter herdenking der Hervorming, 1517–1917. Twee redevoeringen, uitgesproken in de openbare zitting van den senaat der Vrije Universiteit op 31 October 1917*, ed. H. Bavinck and H.H. Kuyper, (Kampen: Kok, 1917), 7. The triad is not found in Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* nor in his other major writings.

10 Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4 vol. (Kampen: Bos, 1895–1901), 3: 523. This sentence is absent from later editions of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. He also quotes Calvin “it is faith alone that justifies; nevertheless the faith that justifies is not alone.” Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 3: 546; cf. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: Kok, 1930⁴), 4: 207. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vol., ed. John Bolt, transl. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 4: 222. Cf.

Even regarding *sola gratia* the picture is more nuanced than one might think at first glance, because according to the Reformers this grace did not exclude the human will, but renewed; it freeing it from its bondage to sin and excluding any cooperation between grace and human efforts or the assent of the so-called free will.¹¹

The *sola*-triad is a theological reaction to Tridentine theology, but the Council of Trent itself of course also reacted to specific Protestant emphases. Martin Luther and other first and second generation reformers stressed irresistible grace, justifying faith and the ultimate authority of scripture. For Trent, however, there was no knowledge of the truth, without tradition accompanying scripture, no justification without works accompanying faith, and no grace without the accompanying assent of the human will.

The claim that the historical Reformation can be characterized by the *sola*-triad, implies that Trent's position was equal to that of the medieval Catholic Church prior to the Reformation. This is only partly true, for the Reformation was intended to be a reform movement within the undivided Catholic Church. There is more continuity between aspects of medieval theology and the soteriology of the reformers than the *solas* suggest.

2 Scripture and Tradition

The expression *sola scriptura* on which we will now focus, is not only problematic for historical reasons, but also because it does not adequately represent the protestant—at least not the reformed—theological position on the authority of scripture.

Although the Wittenberg Reformation was consequent upon intensive study of scripture, a formal doctrine of the authority of scripture was not the basis for Luther's reformation; the 95 theses about indulgences emerged

Jean Calvin, "Acta synodi Tridentinae cum antidote," in Jean Calvin, *Joannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss (Braunschweig, 1863–1900, [Calvin, CO]), 7: 477. Bavinck also refers to Calvin, *Institutes* 3.11.20.

11 This point is nicely illustrated by two book titles. In 1542 Albertus Pighius (ca. 1490–1542) wrote *Concerning Free Will and Divine Grace* (1542)—in response to Calvin's *Institutes*. Calvin answered with *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*. Albertus Pighius, *De libero hominis arbitrio et divina gratia, Libri decem*, (Cologne: Melchior Novensianus, 1542) and Jean Calvin, *Defensio sanae et orthodoxae doctrinae de servitute et liberatione humani arbitrii contra Alberti Pighii Campensis* (Geneva: Joannes Gerardus, 1543). Calvin, CO, 6: 225–404.

from a recovery of the Augustinian doctrine of grace. Only later, in discussions with Johann Eck, Luther switched to an appeal to biblical authority. Originally, he sought to reform the church from within by means of a church council, thereby showing a desire to connect with the conciliarism of the Middle Ages.

In their Leipzig debate (1519) Eck accused Luther of positions that coincided with Hus, whose views had been judged unorthodox by the Council of Constance in 1415. In confirming his agreement with Hus, however, Luther also lost the possibility to appeal to the authority of a council. All that remained was scripture: “No believing Christian can be forced to recognize any authority beyond the sacred scripture (*non ultra sacram scripturam*), which is exclusively invested with divine right (*ius divinum*).”¹²

Broadly speaking, then, the Lutheran reformation moves from *gratia via fides* to *scriptura*. Luther’s appeal to scripture is a means to protect the doctrine of grace from the power of the church. But to end materially with *non ultra scripturam* is different from beginning formally with *sola scriptura*. In any case, scripture is not understood separated from the tradition or the confessions of the church of all ages. After all, Luther did not want to start a new church, but reform the church from inside.

The early church held that the apostolic teaching, as embedded in scripture, was mediated by tradition. Beginning with the fourth century, a development emerged which took tradition as an authoritative source, alongside scripture.¹³ Thus, two views of the relationship between scripture and tradition developed during the Middle Ages. The first view—sometimes called the “one-source theory”—understood tradition as the vehicle by which divine truth, entrusted to the apostles and contained in scripture, was conveyed from generation to generation. The second view—the “two-source theory”—understood tradition as the oral apostolic traditions preserved in the church that complement scripture. The Reformation can be said to have embraced and developed the first and Roman Catholicism the second opinion.

12 *Disputatio Ioannis Eccii et Martini Lutheri Lipsiae habita* (1519), WA 2: 279: “Nec potest fidelis christianus cogi ultra sacram scripturam, que est proprie ius divinum, nisi accesserit nove et probata revelatio: immo ex iure divino.”

13 According to an influential though generalizing distinction of Oberman “tradition” either refers the instrumental vehicle in which Scripture is passed on (Tradition I), or to the oral tradition complementary to Scripture (Tradition II). Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 406.

It is true that original draft of the decree of Trent says: “this truth [of the Gospel] is contained partly [*partim*] in written books, partly [*partim*] in unwritten traditions”;¹⁴ and its final phrasing: “this truth and rule [of the Gospel] are contained in written books and [*et*] in unwritten traditions.”¹⁵ But this change has been overestimated by some scholars as if the council distanced itself from the “two-source theory.”¹⁶

The Reformation hearkens back to the early church’s understanding of the relationship between scripture and tradition: We receive scripture from our predecessors in the process of handing down the Christian faith from generation to generation. Because the phrase *sola scriptura*, however, suggests a rejection of the tradition it is unsuitable as a descriptor of the Reformation’s view of scripture. *Sola scriptura* would find a better home among representatives of the radical reformation, even if not all would express it as crudely as Sebastian Franck (1499–1543), who wrote: “O foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Gregory, not one of them knew the Lord, so help me God, even less were they sent by him to teach. They were, rather, apostles of the anti-Christ.”¹⁷

It is better that Protestants not speak about *sola scriptura*, but about the scriptures received through the tradition. The phrase *scriptura et traditio* itself is not a problem, so long as its elements are not understood as two different equal streams of authority, but together and inclusively. That is, tradition as a process of transmitting scripture, in which the Spirit—the Lord, the giver of life, who spoke through the prophets—enables the church to understand and practice the Word.

14 Council of Trent, *Concilium Tridentinum diariorum, actorum, epistularum, tractatum nova collection*, ed. Societas Goerriesiana, 13 vol. (Freiburg: Herder, 1901–2001), 5: 31.

15 Council of Trent, *Concilium Tridentinum*, 5: 91.

16 Geiselmann writes that “Trent did not mean to define that Scripture and tradition were two separate sources standing side by side.” Joseph R. Geiselmann, “Scripture and Tradition in Catholic Theology,” *Theology Digest* 6 (1958): 75. Originally published as, “Das Missverständnis über das Verhältnis von Schrift und Tradition und seine Überwindung in der katholischen Theologie,” *Una Sancta* 2 (1956): 131–150. Cf. George H. Tavad, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1959), 208. Oberman is not certain that the participants in the council awarded this change weight. Heiko A. Oberman, “Das tridentinische Rechtfertigungsdekret im Lichte spätmittelalterlicher Theologie,” in *Concilium Tridentinum*, ed. R. Bäumer, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979), 303–306. Cf. Johannes Beumer, *Die mündliche Überlieferung als Glaubensquelle: Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte 4, Das Dasein im Glauben*, (Freiburg: Herder, 1962), 83–84.

17 Quoted by Alister McGrath in his *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Wiley, 2011), 141.

Hermeneutics are Indispensable

The Swiss Reformation differed in its start from the German Reformation. In Zürich, the biblical-humanistic preaching of Ulrich Zwingli led to a new understanding of Christian liberty, that culminated in eating sausage during the Lenten fast that Zwingli defended on the basis of scripture in his sermon on the choice and freedom of foods. For the city council he drafted 67 articles in which he confessed to have preached on the ground of the scripture which is called *theopneustos*. “And should I not correctly understand the said scripture, I am ready to be instructed and corrected, but only by the scripture.”¹⁸

Thus Zwingli moves from *scriptura* through *fides*—as a proper understanding of Christian freedom—to *gratia*. Simplified one could say that Zwingli rediscovered the doctrines of grace by taking his starting point in scripture, whereas Luther rediscovered the authority of scripture by taking his starting point in the doctrines of grace.

This approach to scripture, however, has been misunderstood from the beginning, and because of that misunderstanding, it was also nuanced. The Zürich discussions about infant baptism disclose the hermeneutic problem of the Swiss Reformation's original insistence upon *sola scriptura*. With some justification, Zwingli's more radical students appealed to his formal point of departure in scripture with a view to move him to a more radical reformation.

Felix Manz (c. 1498–1527), in preparation for a new disputation on the pace of the local reformation and on infant baptism, addressed Zürich's city council with the claim that Zwingli and his colleagues “know, much better than anyone could expound from scripture, that Christ never taught the baptism of children, and that it was not the custom of the apostles.”¹⁹ He wanted to deal only on the basis of scripture and claimed that no one on earth could prove infant baptism on that basis.

Zwingli published his *Von der Taufe, von der Wiedertaufe und von der Kindertaufe* three months after the first baptismal service in Zürich. In it he presents

18 Eberhard Busch, “Zwingli's Thesen von 1523,” in *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften* 1/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002), 68. The translation is from Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 363.

19 Felix Manz, “Protest and Defense,” in *The Radical Reformation*, ed. Michael G. Baylor (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 96, 100. For the original, see Leonhard von Muralt, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz 1. Zürich* (Zürich: TVZ, 1974), 1: 23–28. Conrad Grebel writes: “the baptism of children is a senseless, blasphemous abomination, contrary to all Scripture.” Conrad Grebel, “Letter to Thomas Müntzer,” in *Radical Reformation*, 44. For the original see Thomas Müntzer: *Schriften und Briefe. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. G. Franz (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1968), 443.

from scripture, the catholic understanding held by the church of all ages concerning baptism. But he could only do so by interpreting scripture from within a specific hermeneutic. According to his view, the twin pillars of infant baptism were 1) the fact that children of Christians belong to God, and 2) the unity of the Old and New Testaments. Against his opponents' question where he found infant baptism in the Old Testament, he replied "We do find baptism in it, and also that which is equal to our baptism today. That is, circumcision."²⁰

Because scripture was the Swiss Reformation's point of departure it was forced to find a new biblical basis for infant baptism. This it first found in the parallel with the circumcision and it later developed this scriptural basis in the doctrine of the covenant. According to some, this defense of infant baptism is a far-fetched solution of despair. At least it was rather new compared to the traditional arguments for the practice of baptizing new born babies. But the issue, at least reveals, that the Reformation of the existing Catholic Church was not a matter of *sola scriptura*, but one of a specific and confessional understanding of scripture. In the development of Reformed covenant theology an old treasure, buried in scripture, was discovered. It is an example of the way in which the Holy Spirit, who never adds new truths to biblically revealed doctrine, leads the church, through crises, to a deeper insight of scripture.

Not everyone agrees. The Anabaptists, together with Baptists who later emerged from Puritanism and Methodism, see infant baptism more as a relic of Rome than a biblically based practice. Perhaps the starting point in the authority of scripture even makes the Reformed tradition, more than the Lutheran, vulnerable to a radicalization of *sola scriptura*. The historical Swiss or Reformed Reformation, however, sought to understand scripture within a confessional hermeneutic, in fellowship with the church of all ages. Although somewhat obscured by the official maintenance of the appeal to scripture alone, this 'confessional hermeneutic' is the basis of the biblical underpinning of infant baptism in the covenantal view that baptism replaces circumcision. That this was sometimes denied with an appeal to scripture alone in polemics both with radical reformers and with Roman Catholic opponents does not annul the fact that in historical reality their confessional appeal to scripture differed largely from biblicism.

The hermeneutic rule, or the *regula fidei*, was found in the creeds of the early church. The later status of the protestant confessions as summaries of biblical doctrine, as *norma normata* next to scripture as *norma normans*, originates

20 Huldreich Zwingli, "Von der Taufe, von der Wiedertaufe und von der Kindertaufe," in *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke*, [CR, 91] (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1927) 4: 327.

in this early switch to scripture understood according to a specific ecclesial hermeneutic. The reformation intended to be a reform of the existing catholic Church and a return to the essence of what the church of all ages had believed on the basis of scripture.

3 Scripture and General Revelation

The phrase *sola scriptura* can also be confusing because it suggests that other sources of knowledge are excluded. Reformed orthodoxy generally left more room in the interpretation of scripture for human reason, than Lutheran orthodoxy.²¹ In the doctrine of the Lord's Supper Lutherans argued that the bodily presence of Christ must be believed simply because Christ said, "This is my body" For them *Christus dixit* or *Dominus dixit* meant the end of the discussion.²² Against this understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Supper, Reformed orthodoxy argued that it was unreasonable to believe that the human body of Christ, as it was ascended to heaven, could at the same time be present on earth.²³

More in general the phrase *sola scriptura*, at least seemingly, excludes a positive role of general revelation in the interpretation of scripture. Of course, in any case of a seeming conflict between scripture and the facts of nature, between special and general revelation, one has to be careful not to conclude that scripture is not reliable. As Augustin already said: 'Whatever they can really demonstrate to be true of physical nature, we must show to be capable of

21 Turretin, for instance, affirms the use of philosophy over against Lutheran opponents. Chapter Lxiii "Is there any use of philosophy in theology? We affirm." Francis Turretin, *Institutes of elenctic theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992–1997) 1: 44. On the use of philosophy in Reformed orthodoxy see Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625–1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus van Mastricht and Anthonius Driessen* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 36–45.

22 According to Abraham Calov, *dominus dixit* was the unique *principium cognoscendi* in the pure matters of faith, although this did not imply that reason did not play a role at all in his theology. Kenneth G. Appold, *Abraham Calov's Doctrine of Vocatio in Its Systematic Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 63. On the phrase in relation to Lutheran Christology and the Lutheran view of the Supper, see Theodor Mahlmann, *Das neue Dogma der lutherischen Christologie: Problem und Geschichte seiner Begründung* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1969), 51–52, 239.

23 Turretin, for instance, argues that human reason can judge that it is a logical contradiction that the human body of Christ can be in many places at the same time. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), 1: 32.

reconciliation with our scriptures; and whatever they assert in their treatises which is contrary to these scriptures of ours, that is to Catholic faith, we must either prove it as well as we can to be entirely false, or at all events we must, without the smallest hesitation, believe it to be so.²⁴ This is a strong statement for the primacy of scripture, but it does not exclude that the correct understanding of scripture might well be informed by the findings in the book of nature.

In Reformed theology the distinction—however complicated it may be—between the moral and the ceremonial laws is an important hermeneutical tool to discern the authoritativeness of the Old Testament. Reformed orthodoxy in some cases took counsel from the *lex naturalis* engraved upon the human conscience to decide which laws in the Torah were ceremonial or political and which of them or which parts of them were moral and abiding.²⁵ One can know which laws belong to the moral core of the law, because there is a correspondence between the eternal moral law of God, as expression of His character, and the sense of good and evil in human beings created in God's image and likeness. Of course, we have to be aware of the complexities of concepts such as natural law and the always fallible human conscience. Nevertheless, it would be helpful in some ethical debates to recognize the interdependence of biblical revelation and the general human knowledge of the good, the true, and the beautiful. It was not *sola scriptura*, for instance, that led to the abolition of slavery. That came about through Christians who had the courage to counter a current in scripture by means of a new hermeneutic view, that is by attaching more value to the implicit relativization of slavery in the New Testament than to its explicit regulation. They took this courage, because they also knew from general revelation—call it natural law or human rights—that the way in which slavery had developed in the seventeenth century was intrinsically evil.

A similar case can be made for the complicated relationship between faith and science. Already at the beginning of the 17th century Reformed scholars accepted a heliocentric cosmology. Among them, the natural philosopher Isaac Beeckmann (1588–1637) from Zeeland, who was influenced by the puritan preaching of Willem Teelinck.²⁶ Unfortunately, the confrontation with Descartes set Reformed theology back, with geocentrism becoming normative on the basis of a particular interpretation of scripture regarding the movement of the sun.

24 Augustine, *De genesi ad litteram* 1.41.21.

25 Henk van den Belt, "Spiritual and Bodily Freedom: Christian Liberty in Early Modern Reformed Theology," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 9 (2015): 161–162.

26 On Beeckman, see Klaas van Berkel, *Isaac Beeckman on Matter and Motion: Mechanical Philosophy in the Making* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

Scripture remains the only lens through which we correctly can perceive general revelation, but *sola scriptura* seems to annul that general revelation altogether and therefore it is a rather problematic slogan for the Reformed view that we know God by two means; first, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe and second—and more clearly—by his holy and divine Word.

4 Word and Spirit

A final reason to nuance *sola scriptura* lies in the relationship between Word and Spirit. In the 1559 edition of his *Institutes* John Calvin wrote: ‘Let this therefore stand: those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught, truly find rest in scripture; it is indeed *autopistos*—it should not be submitted to demonstration by proofs—while it still owes the certainty that it deserves among us to the testimony of the Spirit.’²⁷

As early as the 1539 edition, in which Calvin first discusses scripture as source for the knowledge of God, the question of how we can be assured of the divine origin of scripture without the authority of the church is very important for him. He is afraid that ‘miserable consciences’ will not be able to find ‘solid assurance of eternal life’ if the promises ultimately depend upon human authority.²⁸ The only alternative for him is to seek that certainty in scripture itself, that gives a sense of its own truth, just as light and dark, white and black, sweet and bitter things.²⁹ It is a dangerous error, according to Calvin, to derive the authority of scripture from the church and thus make the truth of God depend on human arbitrariness. The persuasion of the authority of scripture must be sought higher than in human beings, namely in the inner witnessing of the Spirit.³⁰ Scripture gains reverence for itself by its own majesty (*maiestas*), but only affects us seriously when the Spirit seals it to our hearts.

27 John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.5. John Calvin, *Opera Selecta* 3: 67. For a detailed discussion of the background of the Greek term *autopistos* cf. Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust*, Studies in Reformed Theology, vol. 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 74–90.

28 Calvin, *Opera Selecta*, 3: 66. For an extensive discussion of the layers in the *Institutes* cf. Van den Belt, *Authority of Scripture*, 17–64.

29 Calvin, *Opera Selecta*, vol. 3, p. 67. For the text in the final edition cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.2.

30 “[...] ab interiori spiritus sancti testificatione.” In the final edition Calvin rephrases this into “[...] ab arcano testimonio Spiritus.” Calvin, *Opera Selecta*, 3: 69, cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.4.

By stressing *sola scriptura* the *autopistia* of scripture can easily be misunderstood as a form of circular reasoning, a reference to proof texts for divine inspiration. In that case the authority of scripture rests on claims in the New Testament—2 Timothy 3: 16 is a well-known example—that the scriptures are inspired. The concept of *autopistia*, however, is not a reference to proof texts; on the contrary, it is triggered by the attempt to avoid circular reasoning.

Originally the Greek term was used for the Euclidean axioms that were ‘self-convincing,’ because their demonstration was both unnecessary and impossible. Later in medieval theology the term was used for the *principia per se nota*, the principles that formed the self-convincing epistemological starting point of any true *scientia*. Thus, some medieval theological surveys open with a preliminary discussion of theology as a science.³¹ Theology can only be a *scientia* if it rests on *principia* and the *principium* of theology is scripture. This is a *principium* of a special kind, it is not self-evident for human reason as such, but only for the believing and Spirit-illuminated mind.

Reformed theology developed this medieval concept over against the Roman Catholic claim that the authority of scripture depends on the authority of the Church. For the protestants, scripture is self-convincing, it does not depend on human authority or rational proof, but has its authority of its own majesty. This authority of scripture, however, can only be discovered and accepted through the work of the Spirit. A one-sided emphasis on *sola scriptura* in a formal sense therefore can easily erase the appreciation of the interrelationship of Word and Spirit.

This pneumatological approach to the authority of scripture precludes a one-sided emphasis on the nature of inspiration or a strong antithesis between scripture and tradition. The same Spirit who induced the facts of salvation history, who inspired the witnesses to speak and write about these facts, and who safeguarded the tradition of the written testimonies, also dwells in the hearts of Christians today. When the witness of the Spirit applies the witness of scripture to the heart, the living voice of God renews those who hear the Word and makes them witnesses of what He has done for them.

Scripture contains all the truth necessary for salvation and there is no higher court to appeal to. Nevertheless, exactly because the Word of God is *theopneustos*, breathed by the Spirit of God, the authority of scripture is always intertwined with the witness of the Spirit. In the context of (post)modernity this easily is misunderstood as a form of subjectivism, but the witness of the Spirit is not to be confused with some kind of individualistic private judgement. It is the

31 For instance, Aquinas *Super Sent*, q1 a3 qc. 2 arg. 2.

resonance of the Word of God—culminating in Jesus Christ and embodied in the scriptures—in the confession of the church of all ages and in the hearts of the believers nowadays. In essence the witness of the Spirit is the effectual testimony of the gospel regarding Jesus Christ.

5 Conclusions

It is remarkable that protestants often feel a need to nuance or qualify the expression *sola scriptura* by distinguishing the expression from *nuda scriptura* or *solo scriptura*.³² Just as the expression *sola scriptura*, however, can be found incidentally in the writings of the Reformers—John Calvin for instance states that “the true rule of righteousness is to be sought from scripture alone [*ex sola scriptura*]”³³—the same is true of the here rejected *nuda scriptura*. For example, John Calvin admits that the incarnation is a divine mystery beyond the understanding of the human mind, but over against his opponents—in this case skeptical humanists—he admits that “we depend upon scripture alone [*ex nudis scripturis pendeamus*] for convincing people about such great matters.”³⁴ It is noteworthy that Calvin here does not mean that ‘scripture alone’ is his formal theological principle, but that in the discussion with his opponents he has nothing else than scripture itself as vulnerable as it may seem to be.

Sometimes *sola scriptura* is modified and used as a shorthand for the sufficiency of scripture as it is formulated in the protestant confessional statements, such as the *Belgic Confession*, which teaches that “Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein” (article 7) or the *Westminster Confession* which teaches that “the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (I. vi).

32 Thus the evangelicals participating in the American ecumenical initiative “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” declare that it is a “widespread misunderstanding in our community that *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) means *nuda scriptura* (literally, Scripture unclothed; i.e., denuded of and abstracted from its churchly context).” Charles W. Colson and Richard John Neuhaus (eds.), *Your Word is Truth: A Project of Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 39.

33 Calvin *Institutes* 3.17.8, Calvin, *Opera Selecta*, 3: 261.

34 John Calvin, *Concerning scandals*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 18. Cf. Calvin, *co* 8: 16.

The expression *sola scriptura*, however, one-sidedly emphasizes only one of the four defining attributes of scripture namely its sufficiency and does not convey the nuanced way in which this is related to its necessity, clarity, and authority. Whereas Reformed confessional theology leaves room for doctrines “deduced from Scripture”, it was exactly this point that was criticized by the Lutherans who first introduced *sola scriptura*.

It is fine that the expression is often nuanced, but this leaves the question unanswered why the nuanced view of the Reformation on the authority of scripture should be summed up with such a simplified slogan. The continuous desire to nuance *sola scriptura* and to explain it in a different sense than its literal meaning is an implicit acknowledgement that the slogan taken literally is not useful. The real reason for maintaining it is that it has not only become a part of a collective memory, but also functions as a mark of orthodoxy.

In sum, the expression is inadequate for the historical Reformation, because it always has to be nuanced in the light of the Reformed views of tradition, hermeneutics, general revelation and the witness of the Spirit. Regrettably the slogan has even developed into a formal hallmark of orthodoxy that easily can squeeze out the amazement about the revelation of the God who has spoken.

An acceptable theological alternative for the *sola*-triad perhaps is: *gratia prima, fides prima en scriptura prima*. The core of the Reformation debate was about the right relationship between grace and merit, or rather grace and the liberated free will, it was about the right relationship of faith and works, and about the right relationship between scripture and tradition. The word *sola* pulls this relationship apart in advance.

The word *prima* better expresses that grace, faith, and scripture are irreducible points of departure, the *principia*, beyond which a Christian cannot go. Scripture is received by means of the tradition, but its *primacy* lends it authority to reform and renew tradition; tradition may not do so with scripture. Scripture may not be severed from hermeneutics, but it is always a question of which hermeneutic and what is determinative for it. The primacy of scripture means searching for “scriptural principles in order to explain Scripture”.³⁵ Scripture cannot be separated from God’s general revelation in creation or in the human heart, but scripture’s primacy and the darkening of the human mind require that scripture be the lens to see this revelation. Inverting that relationship is wrong.

35 As the title of a Dutch book on hermeneutics says; Seakle Greijdanus, *Schriftbeginselen ter schriftverklaring, en historisch overzicht over theorieën en wijzen van schriftuitlegging* (Kampen: Kok, 1946).

Probably Roman Catholics will also have little difficulty with the primacy of scripture—as the normative point of departure for faith and conduct—even as they will have little difficulty with the primacy of grace and faith. But this does not mean that we are also in agreement about the meaning of primacy. That is a proper subject for further debate.

The primacy of scripture, the primacy of grace and the primacy of faith are non-negotiable. That is not just characteristic of the Reformation, but all of Christianity. Besides, after 500 years no one should forget that the Reformation was not about separation, but renovation of the catholic church of all ages.

Protestantism has made itself unnecessarily vulnerable during the last century because of the *sloganization* of *sola scriptura*, as evidenced by the repeated attempts to define precisely what is and what is not meant by it. This suggests that it is time to place this problematic phrase, along with the other *sola*'s, in the trophy case of church history, there to represent a typical polemical manner in which 20th century Protestants attempted to define the Reformation.

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