ON SOLA SCRIPTURA

What Sola Scriptura Actually Means

The Bible Above Everything, Not the Bible and Nothing Else

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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Few Reformation slogans are as abused as this one, and the abuse comes from both directions at once. Critics of Protestantism hear *Scripture alone* and imagine a chaos in which every believer becomes his own pope, Bible open on his knee, accountable to no one, free to invent whatever doctrine his private judgment happens to produce. And a great many Protestants, sadly, hear the slogan the same way and embrace exactly that chaos—"no creed but the Bible," "me and the Holy Spirit and my own reading," as though two thousand years of the church's confession were so much dead weight to be shrugged off. Both have misheard it. *Sola Scriptura* does not mean the Bible and nothing else. It means the Bible above everything else. The difference is the whole doctrine.

The Norm That Norms

The old theologians had a precise way of saying this. They distinguished between a *norma normans*—a "norming norm," a rule that measures other things but is itself measured by nothing—and a *norma normata*, a "normed norm," a standard that has genuine authority but derives it from being measured against the higher rule. Scripture is the *norma normans*. It stands at the top, answerable to nothing above it, because it is the very Word of God. Everything else in the church—every creed, every confession, every sermon, every theologian however great—is a *norma normata*. These may have real and binding authority, but it is a borrowed authority, granted only insofar as they faithfully express what Scripture already says.

The Formula of Concord opens with exactly this ordering. It states plainly that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only judge, rule, and norm according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated. And then, in the same breath, it says that the creeds and confessions are not judges in the way Scripture is, but witnesses—faithful testimonies to how the Scriptures were understood and defended in the church against error. That single move is the heart of the matter. The Confessions do not smuggle themselves in alongside the Bible as a second authority. They kneel down beneath it and point up.

So the confessional Lutheran holds the Scriptures as the infallible rule and, at the very same time, subscribes wholeheartedly to the ecumenical creeds and the Book of Concord—and there is no contradiction, because he subscribes to them *because* they agree with Scripture, not *insofar as* they might. That difference looks pedantic and is not. *Because* is a confession: this is what the Scriptures teach, examine me by it. *Insofar as* is a reservation dressed as a confession, and it commits a man to nothing. He binds himself to the creeds precisely as a way of binding himself to the Word they confess.

Why Scripture and Not the Church

Why place Scripture at the top and not the church, or the church's tradition, or an office that claims to speak infallibly? Because Scripture alone is God-breathed. *All Scripture is breathed out by God*, Paul writes, *and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Note the claim: not merely useful, but sufficient—able to make the man of God complete, leaving nothing essential to be supplied from another source. Peter says the prophetic word did not come by the will of man, but that men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). This is a quality no council and no bishop can claim for their own words. The church can err; it has erred, gravely and often. Tradition can drift; it has drifted. But the God who breathed out the Scriptures does not err, and so His written Word can bear a weight that nothing merely human can carry.

This is why the noble Bereans were commended: they heard even the apostle Paul preach, and then *examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so* (Acts 17:11). If an apostle's teaching was to be checked against Scripture, then surely every lesser teacher must be. Paul himself insists on it: even if he or an angel from heaven should preach a contrary gospel, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:8). The final court of appeal is not the messenger, however exalted, but the Word.

Not Biblicism

Now the crucial guardrail, because this is where many well-meaning Protestants lose the thread. *Sola Scriptura* is not the same as biblicism—what is sometimes called *solo Scriptura*, the lone-ranger posture of "just me and my Bible." That posture imagines the individual reader dropping into the text with no history, no church, no creed, deriving the faith afresh from scratch by his own lights. It sounds humble, even devout. It is in fact a recipe for pride and for endless division, and its fruit is on display in the thousands of competing sects that each claim the Bible and arrive at contradictory results.

The Reformers rejected this. They read Scripture within the church, in continuity with the faithful who had gone before, gladly confessing the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds not as additions to the Bible but as summaries of it. To confess *Sola Scriptura* rightly is to say: the church has always had teachers, and their teaching matters, and I will not lightly set myself against the settled confession of the saints—but if any of it, at any point, can be shown to contradict the clear Word of God, then the Word wins, every time, without exception.

That is not autonomy. It is the opposite of autonomy: it is placing yourself, and every human authority you might be tempted to trust, under a Word higher than all of them.

The Clarity That Makes It Work

None of this would function if the Scriptures were hopelessly obscure, a book only experts could open. So the Reformers also confessed the perspicuity—the clarity—of Scripture: that in all things necessary for salvation, the Bible is plain enough for the ordinary believer to understand. This does not mean every verse is easy, or that there are no hard passages; Peter himself admitted that some things in Paul are difficult (2 Peter 3:16). It means that the central message—our sin and God's grace in Christ, how a sinner is justified, how one is saved—is delivered so clearly that a plowboy with a Bible can grasp it, and does not need a magisterium to unlock it for him.

This clarity is what makes *Sola Scriptura* a gift rather than a burden. It means the highest authority in the church is not locked away in an office you can never inspect, but lies open on your own lap. You can go to the source. You can, like the Bereans, check what you are told against what God has actually said. *To the teaching and to the testimony!* cries Isaiah. *If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn in them* (Isaiah 8:20). That is *Sola Scriptura* in a single sentence: everything—every teacher, every tradition, every confession, and yes, every private opinion of your own—brought back and measured against the Word that God Himself breathed out. Not the Bible and nothing else. The Bible above everything else.