

SOLA SCRIPTURA: WHAT DID IT MEAN? AND WHAT BECAME OF IT?

Kieran J. O'Mahony, OSA

www.tarsus.ie

Introduction

A listener might be forgiven for expecting that a paper entitled “Sola Scriptura” would be about, well, scripture alone. Alas, if only it were so! *Sola scriptura* opens up a dizzying variety of perspectives. Some are theological: scripture itself, authority, tradition, magisterium, councils, primacy, infallibility (various located!). Others are historical: Did Luther use the term and what did he mean by it? How did *sola scriptura* evolve in the subsequent movements of the Reformation? Not least, there are practical and pastoral questions today. Scripture was never more present in our church life than today. And yet, how do we read the Bible today, both within a tradition (the *regula fidei*) and with a view to critiquing that same tradition? In our contemporary churches, the question arises sharply in ethics: which commandments are time-bound and which are timeless? And so on.

Approach

It is not easy to tread a clear path through this maze of ideas. At the risk of simplification, in this paper we will first follow the evolution of Luther's thought in historical context, then take a brief look at what happened to *sola scriptura* in the immediate post-Reformation period, closing finally with some contemporary observations about the reception of the Scriptures today.

(1) As a bible scholar, my first instinct was to find out when Martin Luther used the expression *sola scriptura*. Anthony Lane, from London Bible College, reports his researches as follows:

Sola scriptura is often described as the formal principle of the Reformation, as opposed to *sola fide* and *sola gratia* which are the material principles. This must be qualified, on two grounds. First, the distinction between formal and material principles dates from as recently as the nineteenth century. Secondly, although there are passages from Reformation times in which the words *sola* and *scriptura* appear in close proximity, *sola scriptura* as a formula or a slogan post-dates the Reformation.¹

Luther himself comes close to using the expression in the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his works in 1539, where he writes

Herein I follow the example of St. Augustine, who was, among other things, the first and almost the only one who determined to be subject to the Holy Scriptures alone (*allein der heiligen Schrift unterworfen seyn*), and independent of the books of all the fathers and saints. On account of that he got into a fierce fight with St. Jerome, who reproached him by pointing to the books of his forefathers; but he did not turn to them. And if the example of St. Augustine had been followed, the pope would not have become Antichrist, and that countless mass of books, which is like a crawling

¹ A.N.S. Lane “Sola scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan” in P. E. Satterthwaite & D. F. Wright (eds.), *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 297-327. The citation is from the opening paragraph, p. 297. The entire article is a thorough overview of what *sola scripture* meant in the past and what it might mean today, in robust dialogue with the Roman Catholic understanding of scripture and tradition.

swarm of vermin (*Gewürm und Geschwürm der Bücher*), would not have found its way into the church, and the Bible would have remained on the pulpit.²

Tracing the evolution of Luther's thought.

The evolution of the spirituality and theology of Martin Luther cannot be divorced from particular historical contexts. Luther's foundational frame of reference, before the fateful year of 1517, sprang from his reading of St Paul and St Augustine. Even if he never used the expression "sola scriptura," nevertheless, the *idea* does stand at the heart of his theology. Luther's theology of Sacred Scripture developed through a series of confrontations dating roughly from 1517 to 1527. It may help to trace these, by paying attention to what Luther himself actually said and wrote.

1517: The Ninety-Five Theses³

Whatever one makes of the historicity of the nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, they remain the key starting point for Luther's national and international public life. The *Theses* are widely known and probably just as widely unread. They are of interest to us here not because they deal extensively with Scripture (they do not) but because they already foreshadow future battle lines with regards to church authority.

The foundational first four theses already offer a new reading of Scripture. Erasmus had already disputed the traditional reading of Matthew 4:17, which in Greek read "convert" but in Latin read "do penance", which was usually taken to mean to go to confession.

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying "Do penance . . . ," wanted the entire life of the faithful to be one of penitence.
2. This phrase cannot be understood as referring to sacramental Penance, that is, confession and satisfaction as administered by the clergy.⁴

Using Scripture to critique the tradition is already present. The theses then go on to point out the limits of papal authority. For example, in theses 5 and 6, we read:

5. The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own discretion or that of the canons.

² *Pastoral Writings*, The Annotated Luther 4; ed. Mary Jane Haemig; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 481-482. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#20300]. The text in German reads as follows: *Nicht viel anders thu ich mit der Väter und Concilien Büchern auch, und folge hierin dem Exempel S. Augustins, der unter andern der erste und fast allein ist, der von aller Väter und Heiligen Bücher will ungefangen, allein der heiligen Schrift unterworfen seyn, und darüber kam in einen harten Straus mit S. Hieronymo, der, ihm fürwarf seiner Vorfahren Bücher; aber daran er sich nichts kehrt. Und hätte man solchen Exempel. S. Augustini gefolgt, der Pabst wäre kein Antichrist worden, und wäre das unzählige Ungeziefer, Gewürm und Geschwürm der Bücher nicht in die Kirchen kommen, und die Biblia wohl auf der Kanzel blieben.*

³ On the 95 Theses, see the following: Thomas Kaufmann, *Martin Luther*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2017, pp. 42-47. Thomas Kaufmann, *Erlöste und Verdammte. Eine Geschichte der Reformation*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2016, pp. 103-114; Lyndall Roper, *Martin Luther. Renegade and Prophet*, London: The Bodley Head, 2016, pp. 95-103; Peter Stanford, *Martin Luther. Catholic Dissident*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017, pp. 95-128.

⁴ *The Roots of Reform*, The Annotated Luther 1; ed. Timothy J. Wengert; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 34. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#225]

6. The pope cannot remit any guilt except by declaring and confirming its remission by God or, of course, by remitting guilt in [legal] cases reserved to himself. In showing contempt regarding such cases, the guilt would certainly remain.⁵

The place of Scripture in Luther's thinking is indicated in a few of the theses, such as:

18. It neither seems proved—either by any logical arguments or by Scripture—that souls in purgatory are outside a state of merit, that is, unable to grow in love.⁶
53. People who forbid the preaching of the Word of God in some churches altogether in order that indulgences may be preached in others are enemies of Christ and the pope.
54. An injustice is done to the Word of God when, in the very same sermon, equal or more time is spent on indulgences than on the Word.⁷

Already, the priority of Scripture is clear. We may note in passing the reference to “logical arguments” as well — a constant of Luther's thinking, in spite of the evident downgrading of philosophy and reason (“the devil's whore”). The slightly later “Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses” [1518] expands on each point of the Ninety-Five Theses.

*1518 The Heidelberg Disputation (25 April)*⁸

The head of the Augustinians in Germany, Johann von Staupitz, Luther's local superior and sponsor, called a chapter of the Order in Heidelberg to give Luther a chance to explain himself to the Augustinians and to a wider audience. The focus of the twenty-eight theological and twelve philosophical theses, presented by Luther at Heidelberg, was different. No mention of indulgences or the limits of the papacy; instead a concentration on sin, free will, and grace, according to express wish of Staupitz. This reading of the human condition, from Paul but through the lens of Augustine, marked a new theological point of arrival and departure. Arguing all the time from Scripture, Luther portrays the futility of human effort in relation to God.

- 13 *Free will, after [the fall into] sin, exists in name only, and when “it does what is within it,” it commits a mortal sin.* The first part is clear, for the will is captive and subject to sin. Not that it is nothing but that it is not free except to do evil. According to John 8[:34, 36], “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. . . . So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” Hence St. Augustine says in his book *The Spirit and the Letter*, “Free will without grace has the power to do nothing but sin”; and in the second book of *Against Julian*, “You call the will free, but in fact it is an enslaved will,” and in many other places. The second part is clear from what has been said above and from the verse in Hos. 13[:9], “Israel, you are bringing misfortune upon yourself, for your salvation is alone with me etc.”

⁵ *The Roots of Reform*, The Annotated Luther 1; ed. Timothy J. Wengert; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 35. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#230]

⁶ *The Roots of Reform*, The Annotated Luther 1; ed. Timothy J. Wengert; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 37. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#245]

⁷ *The Roots of Reform*, The Annotated Luther 1; ed. Timothy J. Wengert; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 41. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#284]

⁸ For more on the Heidelberg chapter, see: Thomas Kaufmann, *Erlöste und Verdammte. Eine Geschichte der Reformation*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2016, p. 119; Lyndall Roper, *Martin Luther. Renegade and Prophet*, London: The Bodley Head, 2016, pp. 105-110; Peter Stanford, *Martin Luther. Catholic Dissident*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017, pp. 142-146.

- 14 *Free will, after [the fall into] sin, has the power to do good only passively, but always has the power to do evil actively.* Just as a dead person can do something vis-à-vis life only passively, but, while living, a person can also do something actively toward death. Free will, however, is dead, as demonstrated by the dead whom the Lord has raised up, as the holy teachers of the church say. St. Augustine, moreover, proves this same thesis in his various writings against the Pelagians.⁹

The pessimism is significant and will be the anthropological foundation for *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Luther had already moved beyond criticising the theology and practice of indulgences. Furthermore, the disputation attracted a host of new followers, some of whom would be highly significant for the unfolding of the Reformation.¹⁰

*1518 The Diet of Augsburg (October 12 to 18)*¹¹

The Imperial Diet, meeting in Augsburg from spring 1518, had a huge agenda, including the appeal of Pope Leo X for a crusade against the Ottomans. It was arranged, finally, that Luther would meet the papal legate, Cajetan (Tommaso de Vio). For our topic of *sola scriptura*, it was to prove a fateful encounter. The discussions focussed on two issues in particular: the treasury of merits and the role of faith in the sacraments. The debate could not possibly stay at the level presented and quickly turned into a debate regarding the primacy of Scripture over papal decrees, in particular the Bull *Unigenitus* from the collection of papal decrees known as the *Extravagantes*, because they were not always included in collections of canon law. Cajetan and Luther met three times. In the course of the second encounter, Luther piously declared:

I, who debated and sought the truth could not have done wrong by such inquiry, much less be compelled to recant, without having been heard or convicted. Today I declare publicly that I am not conscious of having said anything contrary to Holy Scripture, the church fathers, the papal decretals, or right reason. All that I have said today seems to me to have been sensible, true, and catholic.¹²

In his published version of events, Luther famously wrote (anticipating Worms?):

These and many other explicit passages lead me inexorably to the position stated above. For this reason, Most Reverend Father in Christ, since you are blessed by divine favour with unusual gifts, especially with keen judgment, I humbly beg Your Most Reverend highness to deal leniently with me, to have compassion with my conscience, to show me how I may understand this doctrine differently, and not to compel me to revoke those things which I must believe according to the testimony of

⁹ *The Roots of Reform*, The Annotated Luther 1; ed. Timothy J. Wengert; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 95-96. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#764]

¹⁰ Roper, Lyndall, *Martin Luther. Renegade and Prophet*, London: The Bodely Head, 2016, p. 109.

¹¹ The confrontation with Cajetan was hugely significant: Thomas Kaufmann, *Martin Luther*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2017, pp. 50-51. Thomas Kaufmann, *Erlöste und Verdammt. Eine Geschichte der Reformation*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2016, pp. 119-120; Lyndall Roper, *Martin Luther. Renegade and Prophet*, London: The Bodely Head, 2016, 114-120; Peter Stanford, *Martin Luther. Catholic Dissident*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017, 151-157.

¹² *The Roots of Reform*, The Annotated Luther 1; ed. Timothy J. Wengert; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 133. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#1102]

my conscience. As long as these Scripture passages stand, I cannot do otherwise, for I know that one must obey God rather than mortals [Acts 5:29].¹³

The combination of humility and steely steadfastness is still striking. At the end of the Augsburg meeting, there was a rumour that the prior general of the Augustinians, Gabriele della Volta, had asked Cajetan to seize Luther and bring him to Rome. Staupitz made an extraordinary move: he released Luther from his Augustinian vows. In this way, Staupitz made clear his sympathy for Luther and his refusal to control a man whose career he had sponsored so significantly.

*The Leipzig Debate 1519*¹⁴

One of Luther's strongest opponents, even at this early stage, was Johann Meier von Eck ("John Eck"). He was very different to Cajetan and more like Luther himself in terms of background and education and even in reading. They resembled each other too in the masterful exploitation of the printing press. Eck was justly regarded as brilliant and had published a refutation of the Ninety-Five Theses (the "Obelisks") in the late spring of 1518. Wittily enough, a reply was made, entitled the "Asterisks," written by Karlstadt. After much negotiation, it was agreed that the debate could take place at Leipzig, in the territory of Duke George of Saxony, the Elector's cousin. The dispute, between Eck on one side and Luther and Karlstadt on the other, lasted nearly three weeks, beginning on the 27th of June and concluding on the 15th of July. Initially, the topic was free will and what we may call the metaphysics of grace. Eventually, it was the turn of Eck and Luther, who debated the meaning of the word "rock" in Matthew 16:18, "you are Peter and on this rock." Luther maintained that the rock was Christ, not Peter and certainly not the papacy. Eck's approach here was simple: to tempt Luther to affirm positions taken by the Bohemian Jan Hus in the previous century. In agreeing with some of positions of Hus, Luther implicitly denied the authority of the Council of Constance (1414-18). He was developing his doctrine of Scripture as above the authority of popes, councils and church fathers, all of whom may err. Overall, it is generally conceded that Leipzig was a defeat for Luther in terms of the debate. On the other hand, Luther's understanding of Scripture had advanced under pressure from the Eck, the subtle dialectician. Luther himself dated his true awakening to the Leipzig period.

As it turned out, Luther was entering upon a period of extraordinary productivity and for the next two years he was like a man on fire. It has been estimated that fully 20% of all German publications between 1500 and 1530 came from his pen.¹⁵ *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* effectively dismantled papal authority and power within the German lands. The one authority left standing was the Bible. He summarised his attack as follows:

In the first place, when secular authority has been used against them, they have made decrees and declared that secular authority has no jurisdiction over them, but that, on the contrary, spiritual authority is above secular authority. In the second place, when the attempt is made to reprove them with the Scriptures, they raise the objection that

¹³ *The Roots of Reform*, The Annotated Luther 1; ed. Timothy J. Wengert; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 146-147. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#1151]

¹⁴ For more on the Leipzig debate, see the following: Thomas Kaufmann, *Martin Luther*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2017, pp. 51-52. Thomas Kaufmann, *Erlöste und Verdamnte. Eine Geschichte der Reformation*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2016, pp. 119-123; Lyndall Roper, *Martin Luther. Renegade and Prophet*, London: The Bodley Head, 2016, 125-144; Peter Stanford, *Martin Luther. Catholic Dissident*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017, 167-183.

¹⁵ Roper, Lyndall, *Martin Luther. Renegade and Prophet*, London: The Bodley Head, 2016, p. 142.

only the pope may interpret the Scriptures. In the third place, if threatened with a council, their story is that no one may summon a council but the pope.¹⁶

Further on, he claims:

Therefore, their claim that only the pope may interpret Scripture is an outrageous fancied fable. They cannot produce a single letter [of Scripture] to maintain that the interpretation of Scripture or the confirmation of its interpretation belongs to the pope alone. They themselves have usurped this power.¹⁷

A figure we shall come back to was also involved: Hieronymous Emser. Emser, a follower of Erasmus, was both a theologian and secretary to Duke George. He was part of the newly organised Catholic response to Luther. To keep the chronological lines clear, we shall hear of him again in 1524/27.

This led naturally enough to the even more radical publication, *On the Freedom of the Christian* and *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. A break with Rome became inevitable, as a citation from the latter will illustrate (Luther is attacking Eck and Emser).

For while I denied the divine authority of the papacy, I still admitted its human authority. But after hearing and reading the super-subtle subtleties of these showoffs, with which they so adroitly prop up their idol (for my mind is not altogether unteachable in these matters), I now know for certain that the papacy is the kingdom of Babylon and the power of Nimrod, the mighty hunter.¹⁸

The pope was not without a response on 3 January 1521, Leo X excommunicated Brother Martin Luther.

*The Diet of Worms (1521)*¹⁹

The Imperial Diet met at Worms from 28 January to 26 May 1521, with the newly-elected and young Emperor Charles V presiding. Luther was before the Diet from the 16th to the 18th April. He was asked if the twenty-five books piled up were his and would he recant the teaching therein. His final word to the Diet is famous:

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 recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.²⁰

¹⁶ *The Roots of Reform*, The Annotated Luther 1; ed. Timothy J. Wengert; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 380-381. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#2565]

¹⁷ *The Roots of Reform*, The Annotated Luther 1; ed. Timothy J. Wengert; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 388. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#2582]

¹⁸ *Church and Sacraments*, The Annotated Luther 3; ed. Paul W. Robinson; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 14-15. [accord://read/Annotated_Luther#11604]

¹⁹ For the details of the meeting, see Thomas Kaufmann, *Erlöste und Verdammte. Eine Geschichte der Reformation*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2016, pp. 129-138; Lyndall Roper, *Martin Luther. Renegade and Prophet*, London: The Bodley Head, 2016, pp. 173-193; Peter Stanford, *Martin Luther. Catholic Dissident*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017, pp. 215-232.

²⁰ *Martin Luther*. tr. James L. Schaaf, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985-93, 1:460.

Unlike at the Council of Constance, Charles V honoured the safe-conduct given to the heretic. The eventual kidnapping of Luther by Duke George is not without burlesque. He took him to a mighty fortress, the “feste Burg” of the Wartburg, in Eisenach, for his own safety. There, in only eleven weeks he translated the entire Greek New Testament into German. The September Testament soon sold out. Luther was on fire.

Three other disputes helped shaped the development of Luther’s teaching about Scripture. These can be referred to more briefly.

*Thomas Müntzer (1489-1525)*²¹

Thomas Müntzer was a radical preacher and theologian, in apocalyptic and prophetic style. Initially supported by Luther, he became an opponent of both Luther and the Catholics, a social reformer who triggered the Peasant War. He is important for our discussion because he placed spiritual experience and the Holy Spirit working in the individual *above* Scripture itself. He was not at all an unlearned man and it was essential to oppose him. The Zwickau prophets and their movement Luther dismissed as Satan himself. Even the measured Melancthon said that while God woke up Luther to the Reformation, Müntzer had been woken up by the devil himself. According to Luther, the Spirit does not work outside the Scriptures and certainly not in private revelations leading to uncontrollable social chaos. The commentary on the eighth of the Schmalkadic Articles, ostensibly on confession, reads,

In these matters, which concern the spoken, external word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives God’s Spirit or grace to nobody except through or with the external word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the Enthusiasts, that is, the “spirits,” who boast that they have the Spirit apart from and before contact with the word. Thereafter, they judge, interpret, and twist Scripture or the oral word according to their pleasure. Müntzer did this, and there are still many doing this today, who wish to be shrewd judges between the spirit and the letter without knowing what they say or teach.²²

*Emser and Erasmus over the German New Testament*²³

The last dispute to notice was over Luther’s German New Testament and his reading of the Bible. Hieronymus Emser had originally been sympathetic to the reform, from a practical, not a doctrinal point of view. Divisions opened up between him and Luther from the Leipzig disputation onwards. For Emser, Luther’s own theology was the driving force of his reading of Scripture, importing predestination, the lack of free will and *sola fide* into the Bible. He reviewed Luther’s New Testament and submitted to Duke George some 607 translation failures. For example,

- The cavalier dismissal of the letter of James.
- The introduction “alone” into Rom 3:21 and 28.

²¹ The Peasant War was a turning point for Luther. For more, see the following: Thomas Kaufmann, *Erlöste und Verdammte. Eine Geschichte der Reformation*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2016, pp. 160-166; Lyndall Roper, *Martin Luther. Renegade and Prophet*, London: The Bodley Head, 2016, pp. 259-272; Peter Stanford, *Martin Luther. Catholic Dissident*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017, pp. 310-326.

²² *Word and Faith*, The Annotated Luther 2; ed. Kirsi I. Stjerna; Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 460. [accordance://read/Annotated_Luther#8500]

²³ Friedemann Stengel, *Sola Scriptura im Kontext. Behauptung und Bestreitung des reformatorischen Schriftsprinzips*, Leipzig: Evngelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016, pp. 90-102.

- By works, Paul meant the ritual law and circumcision (NB).
- *Varia*: Luke 2:14 (good will); Phil 2:13 (good will) etc.

Erasmus of Rotterdam, a much more substantial figure, made much the same point. According to him, Luther's theology brings justification into the Bible in places where it is unwarranted. Erasmus believed in a weakened free will and associated Luther with Mani, Wycliff and Hus. The Dutchman had a particular "theology" of Scripture. Scripture is *holy*, above our reason and therefore obscure. The challenge lies in our capacity to understand. With the help of the Holy Spirit, revelation continually takes place through the Holy Spirit. Luther's insistence that God's word is clear and univocal is contradicted in many places in Scripture and, indeed, by the wide and sometime wild differences of interpretation among the followers of Luther and those who came after him. Finally, for Erasmus, Luther overextends himself by saying only those who agree with him know Christ truly and have the Spirit.

Luther's response was as expected. Scripture is clear; the Spirit works only through the external Word of God. Furthermore, the necessity of the cross is predicated upon human helplessness, lack of free will and radical need of grace. In that sense, *sola scriptura* flows naturally from *solus Christus* and even *sola crux*. In other words, Luther's vision was a whole system, an entire way of looking at the world.

As a kind of summary, the following map may help. The *sola* in *sola scriptura* is set against three rivals: (i) the tradition and teaching authority of the church; (ii) Christian experience, and, in particular the phenomenon of prophecy; (iii) natural revelation and the role and adequacy of human reason. Nevertheless, in the Wittenberg "school" of preaching, a wider education continued to be norm.²⁴

(2) Later Reformed reception of *sola scriptura*

To illustrate what became of *sola scriptura*, reference will be made to a number of confessions and creeds.

The Belgic Confession (1561)

The *Belgic Confession* was composed in French for the churches of Flanders and the Netherlands (revised variously up to 1619)

We know him by two means: first, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate *the invisible things of God*, namely, *his eternal power and Godhead*, as the Apostle Paul saith (Rom. i. 20). All which things are sufficient to convince men, and leave them without excuse.

Secondly, he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word; that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.²⁵

²⁴ Richard Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God. The Wittenberg School and its Scripture-Centered Proclamation*, Grand Rapids MN: Baker Academic, 2016, p. 12.

²⁵ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Bibliotheca symbolica ecclesiae universalis; Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Harper Longmans, 1919), 384. [accord://read/Schaff-Creeds#18676]

The Creed goes on to name which books are in the canonical scriptures and then asks where their authority comes from.

We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing, without any doubt, all things contained in them, not so much because the Church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Ghost witnesseth in our hearts that they are from God, whereof they carry the evidence in themselves. For the very blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are fulfilling.²⁶

The denial of church “approval” is telling. All were aware that church existed before the New Testament and that the New Testament itself does not affirm which books are in it. It has been said, with some wit, that the New Testament is indeed inspired, except for the table of contents.

In the seventh article, it goes on to speak of the sufficiency of Scripture.

We believe that these Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation, is sufficiently taught therein. ... nor ought we to compare custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times or persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes, with the truth of God, for the truth is above all: for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule...

It does illustrate that the heirs of the Reform did not at all reject authority as such, only certain authorities.

The Formula of Concord (1577)

The *Formula of Concord* is an authoritative statement of Lutheran faith composed in 1577 and incorporated into the *Book of Concord* in 1580. There are twelve substantial articles, of which the first and foundational one reads:

We believe, confess, and teach that the only rule and norm, according to which all dogmas and all doctors ought to be esteemed and judged, is no other whatever than the prophetic and apostolic writings both of the Old and of the New Testament, as it is written (Psalm cxix. 105): ‘Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.’ And St. Paul saith (Gal. i. 8): ‘Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed.’ But other writings, whether of the fathers or of the moderns, with whatever name they come, are in nowise to be equalled to the Holy Scriptures, but are all to be esteemed inferior to them, so that they be not otherwise received than in the rank of witnesses, to show what doctrine was taught after the Apostles’ times also, and in what parts of the world that more sound doctrine of the Prophets and Apostles has been preserved.²⁷

²⁶ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Bibliotheca symbolica ecclesiae universalis; Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Harper Longmans, 1919), 386-387. [accord://read/Schaff-Creeds#18697]

²⁷ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Bibliotheca symbolica ecclesiae universalis; Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Harper Longmans, 1919), 94. [accord://read/Schaff-Creeds#16026]

In the very next article, the Formula goes on to affirm the creeds of the early councils such as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds.

The Westminster Confession 1647

The *Westminster Confession* was drawn up in 1646 and published the following year.

VI. 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: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word.²⁸

Prudently, it adds the following:

X. The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.²⁹

Many other examples of creeds and catechisms could be cited. It emerges from these and other texts that *sola scriptura* did not mean *sola scriptura* or the rejection of tradition or the setting aside of authority. This is abundantly clear from two recent books on *sola scriptura* from a resolutely reformed position. At the very start, Matthew Barret, in *God's Word Alone*, states,

In fact, *sola Scriptura* means that the Bible is our chief, supreme, and ultimate authority. Notice, however, that I didn't say the Bible is our *only* authority.³⁰

In a more sophisticated way, Keith Mathison, in his *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, establishes the same point. According to Mathison, the key issues are scripture, authority, tradition and the role of the communion of saints, the church. In his view, there are four positions, each marked with a T for tradition.

TO: this is the denial of tradition entirely. A good illustration would be the Anabaptists or the pure evangelicals of today. Mathison has no time at all for this, dismissing it as "unbiblical, illogical and unworkable."³¹

TI: This is the primacy of scripture as illustrated clearly in the first three centuries of the church, most of the church fathers and taken up again at the Reformation. It acknowledges the *regula fidei* for interpreting scripture and indeed the authority of the church, the communion of saints. However, such authority is to minister to the word and not dominate it.

²⁸ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Bibliotheca symbolica ecclesiae universalis; Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Harper Longmans, 1919), 604. [accord://read/Schaff-Creeds#20966]

²⁹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Bibliotheca symbolica ecclesiae universalis; Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Harper Longmans, 1919), 606. [accord://read/Schaff-Creeds#20976]

³⁰ Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone. The Authority of Scripture. What the Reformers Taught..and Why It Still Matters*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2016, p. 23.

³¹ Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, Moscow ID: Canon Press, 2001. p. 245.

TII: This tendency to ascribe equal authority to Scripture and Tradition emerged in the later patristic period and the Middle Ages. It was canonised by Trent and remains the basic Roman Catholic stance.

TIII: This is a later evolution of TII, in the light of papal infallibility. It risks subordinating both Scripture and Tradition to the central authority of the Bishop of Rome.³²

For Mathison, TO, TII and TIII do not stand up to close analysis, biblical, historical or theological. To make it clearer, it would be necessary to refine the understanding offered in a variety of approaches, such as Scripture sole source; the sufficiency of Scripture; Scripture as sole authority; and lastly, Scripture as final authority. The continued divergence from Rome lay and still lies in the last category—final authority.³³

(3) Trent and Vatican II³⁴

*The Council of Trent (1545-1563)*³⁵

The Council of Trent began meeting in 1545 and met on and off until 1563. It too involved a kind of reformation and in the course of its deliberations, it looked as the role of Scripture and Tradition. The decree in Sacred Scripture is dated the 8th April 1546.

The sacred and holy, œcumenical, and general Synod of Trent,—lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the same three legates of the Apostolic See presiding therein,—keeping this always in view, that, errors being removed, the purity itself of the Gospel be preserved in the Church; which (Gospel), before promised through the prophets in the holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first promulgated with His own mouth, and then commanded to be preached by His Apostles to every creature, as the fountain of all, both saving truth, and moral discipline; and seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand: [the Synod] following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament—seeing that one God is the author of both—as also the said traditions, as well those appertaining to faith as to morals, as having been dictated, either by Christ’s own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.³⁶

³² Mathison expands on categories developed by Heiko. A. Oberman. See his *Luther. Man between God and the Devil*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. Mathison makes no use of the sentence attributed to Pius IX: “La tradition, ç’est moi!”/ “La tradizione, sono io.”

³³ See the subtle argumentation in A.N.S. Lane “Sola scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan” in P. E. Satterthwaite & D. F. Wright (eds.), *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 297-327.

³⁴ For a rich and wide reflection, see P. Fintan Lyons, OSB, *Martin Luther. His Challenge Then and Now*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2017.

³⁵ For a reformed view of Trent, see Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, Moscow ID: Canon Press, 2001, pp. 128-133.

³⁶ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Bibliotheca symbolica ecclesiae universalis; Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Harper Longmans, 1919), 80 [accord://read/Schaff-Creeds#9825]

Originally, the text said the truth of the Gospel is partly contained in written books and partly in unwritten traditions. The final version was more circumspect: this truth and discipline are contained in the written books *and* the unwritten traditions. It could be read to mean that Scripture was materially sufficient.

Augustinian footnote

Girolamo Seripando was our prior general from 1539-1551. As a young man, he may have met Luther when the latter visited Rome, because Seripando was then secretary to Giles of Viterbo. Seripando, Giles of Viterbo and Martin Luther all belonged to the observant (spiritual reform) movement of our Order. Seripando was one of the few major figures to attend all three sessions of Trent, ending as Cardinal Legate to the Council. Being an Augustinian, he had to deal with a good deal of suspicion and mistrust and, indeed, he did want to avoid a break with the Lutherans.³⁷ Like Luther, he gave a higher place to religious experience and was convinced of the priority of Scripture over traditions. For example, he questioned the equal status of the Deuterocanonical books. At Trent, he was a consistently minority voice.³⁸

Vatican II

The same subject came up again at Vatican II, in the Decree on Revelation. This key document underwent four revisions. The first draft had spoken of the sources of revelation, tradition supplementing Scripture. As well as that, the categories had changed. The new theology queried the idea of propositional revelation and gave a fresh priority to God's self-disclosure as the core revelation, which we access through Scripture and Tradition. That switch to personalist categories marked a good deal of the theology of the time. It retained a studiously neutral stance on the material sufficiency of Scripture. However, the pope intervened and adjusted the text as follows:

Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind. (Dei Verbum 6)

In His gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations. Therefore, Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion (see 2 Cor. 1:20; 3:13; 4:6), commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching, (1) and to impart to them heavenly gifts. This Gospel had been promised in former times through the prophets, and Christ Himself had fulfilled it and promulgated it with His lips. This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the Apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by observances handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, too, by those Apostles and apostolic men who under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing. (Dei Verbum 7)

³⁷ For his sympathy for the Reformers, see Girolamo Seripando, *Discorsi. Il vescovo, la giustificazione, l'impegno politico*, vol.1. Roma: Città Nuova Editrice, 2001, p. 145-157.

³⁸ John W. O'Malley, *Trent. What Happened at the Council*, London: Belknap Press, 2013, pp. 89-100.

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. *Consequently, it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed.* Therefore, both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence. (Dei Verbum 9)

With this final text, the exposition of scripture and tradition draws to an unfinished end. It is time for some concluding observations.

Towards some conclusions

Pope Francis said, “I think Martin Luther’s intentions were not mistaken.” Affirmation by double negative is not without its power! Nevertheless, the bishop of Rome could have gone a little further. The critique of church practice was justified over and over again. This was not simply in regard to obvious abuses, such a simony and nepotism, but also in regard to certain traditional theologies. Luther is a penetrating writer, not without his agendas and never or hardly ever boring. His voice needs to be heard again, even when he is plainly mistaken. He did have worthy opponents in Cajetan, Eck, Emser and Erasmus. Nevertheless, much of Luther’s biblical and historical critiques of the extraordinary claims of the papacy require both respect and answering.

The outstanding discovery for me when writing this paper was the robust place given to tradition (the *regula fidei*). *Sola scriptura* is not over against tradition, as we saw. The real question is *which* tradition, *why* and *by what* authority. Ecumenical dialogue continues to deal with these important questions. There is no room for complacency: there is still a case to be answered.

As a Catholic biblical scholar, with an interest in the history of the Church and the Reformation, the following points seem to be to be worth airing:

- Tracing the claims of the papacy as it evolved back to Matthew 16 is anachronistic, unjustified and unnecessary.
- Claiming that the tradition was entrusted to the Apostles during the forty days between Pentecost and Ascension and slowly brought to light over subsequent centuries makes no sense at all. It worked for the Pharisees, who claimed to get their tradition from Moses on Mount Sinai. It worked for Trent perhaps. It does not work for us.
- Finding the institution, for example, of all seven sacraments in the New Testament is to abuse the historical nature of the text and to ignore the perfectly valid development of sacramental practice and subsequent doctrines.

Overall, it is better to be utterly transparent about the historical emergence of doctrines in Catholic tradition, thus avoiding all anachronistic (by which I mean dishonest) reading back.

Finally, what about *sola scriptura* and the tradition? After the Reformation and after more than three centuries of critical biblical scholarship, several points seem evident:

- Scripture cannot be read outside a tradition — practically and theoretically.
- Scripture itself is a fruit of tradition — the church, the community of faith, existed *before* the New Testament.
- Vatican II was right to take revelation out of propositional categories and to relocate it in personalist categories. The chief revelation is God’s disclosure of God’s self through Jesus Christ in the Spirit.
- The means by which this disclosure continues is primarily through the Holy Spirit, by means of Scripture and Tradition.
- Scripture itself, then, becomes not so much a book of doctrines but a place of encounter. We read it not only with the Church but *in* the Church.
- Following Yves Congar, it is vital to distinguish Tradition with a capital T, the *regula fidei*, from traditions with a lower-case t, meaning the variety of time-bound responses over the centuries. Much needs to be relegated to the past, such as the treasury of merit and indulgences. A healthy dose of amnesia would cure a lot.
- Such a distinction between Tradition and traditions may permit us to separate essential non-church-dividing traditions, the *adiaphora* of the reformers or, in Catholic terms, the hierarchy of doctrine, from inessential opinions about which we may differ without breaking communion.
- Catholic integrity is best served, not by a naïve historicism, but by a robust theology of the development of doctrine, guided by the Holy Spirit, integrating Scripture and Tradition, capital T. There are paradoxes: the Catholic church, with an explicit doctrine of the development of doctrine, refuses to develop the theology of Orders for example; while the Churches of the Reform, evidently tied to what Scripture says, have moved beyond what Scripture says to include women in the ministry.

So, the challenges raised by Luther and other reformers have not at all gone away. They continue to form part of the wide range of ecumenical dialogues underway. They will surely form part of our re-imagining faith and Church for our times and into the future.

Digital Resources

Quotations from Luther’s own writings are taken from a digital version of *The Annotated Luther*, volumes 1-5. Volume 6 on the interpretation of Scripture is not yet available. Accordance edition hypertexted and formatted by OakTree Software Inc., version 1.0.

Timothy J. Wengert (ed.) *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2015

Kirsi I. Stjerna (ed.) *The Annotated Luther, Volume 2: Word and Faith*. Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2015.

Paul W. Robinson (ed.) *The Annotated Luther, Volume 3: Church and Sacraments*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2016.

Mary Jane Haemig (ed.) *The Annotated Luther, Volume 4: Pastoral Writings*. Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2016.

Hans Hillerbrand (ed.) *The Annotated Luther, Volume 5: Christian Life in the World*. Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2017.

Forthcoming

Euan K. Cameron (ed.) *The Annotated Luther, Volume 6: The Interpretation of Scripture*. Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2017.

Quotations from the creeds are also taken from a digital version of *Bibliotheca Symbolica Ecclesiae Universalis*, in English. Public Domain, hypertexted and formatted by OakTree Software Inc, version 1.4.

Philip Shaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, in three volumes, sixth edition—revised and enlarged. Public Domain.

Bibliography

Barrett, Matthew, *God's Word Alone. The Authority of Scripture. What the Reformers Taught..and Why It Still Matters*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2016.

Eire, Carlos, *Reformations. The Early Modern World*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016.

Kaufmann, Thomas, *Erlöste und Verdamnte. Eine Geschichte der Reformation*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2016.

Kaufmann, Thomas, *Martin Luther*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2017.

Kolb, Robert, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God. The Wittenberg School and its Scripture-Centered Proclamation*, Grand Rapid MI: BakerAcademic, 2016.

Lane, A.N.S., “Sola scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan” in P. E. Satterthwaite & D. F. Wright (eds.), *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 297-327.

Lyons OSB, P. Fintan, *Martin Luther. His Challenge Then and Now*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2017

Mathison, Keith A., *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, Moscow ID: Canon Press, 2001.

O'Malley, John W., *Trent. What Happened at the Council*, Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press, 2013.

Obermann, Heiko, *Luther. Man between God and the Devil*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006.

Roper, Lyndal, *Martin Luther. Renegade and Prophet*, London: The Bodely Head, 2016.

Seripando, Girolamo, *Discorsi. Il vescovo, la giustificazione, l'impegno politico*, vol.1. Roma: Città Nuova Editrice, 2001.

Stanford, Peter, *Martin Luther. Catholic Dissident*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017.

Stengel, Friedemann, *Sola Scriptura im Kontext. Behauptung und Bestreitung des reformatorischen Schriftsprinzips*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016.