

A Theology of Opportunity: *Sola Scriptura* and the Great Commission

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Part 2 of 3: Three Misunderstandings of *Sola Scriptura*

In the first part of this essay, I suggested that the principle *sola Scriptura*, the sufficiency of Scripture, was central to the “theology of opportunity.” This time I will try to flesh out that principle for you, to show how it helps us to seize opportunities in our time.

First, it is important for us to make sure that the principle is not misunderstood. There are three misunderstandings which especially need to be corrected, in my view. One is the idea that *sola Scriptura* warrants traditionalism. The next is that *sola Scriptura* leaves no room for human creativity. And the third is that *sola Scriptura* leaves no room for the Holy Spirit.

The First Misunderstanding

I won't say much about the first misunderstanding. I already dealt with that in the previous section where I showed that in Scripture itself, and in the Reformation, *sola Scriptura* is typically used *against* the traditionalist mindset. Nevertheless, people sometimes, oddly enough, seem to employ it in exactly the opposite way, especially when they are talking about worship. In Reformed churches, of course, worship is governed by the “regulative principle,” which is a form of *sola Scriptura*: nothing must be done in worship without scriptural warrant. Some have sought to use this principle to argue for a traditional Puritan style

of worship in the church, and to attack any practices which have developed in more recent times.

Now this is a very long argument. I have written a forty-page paper on the subject. Some people believe conscientiously that contemporary styles of worship do not have scriptural warrant, and that argument will have to be resolved issue-by-issue; I cannot do that here. But I fear that sometimes in the course of the argument one thing is forgotten: the regulative principle does not in itself contain any bias in favor of the traditional and against the contemporary. Indeed, as we have seen, the primary use of the principle in Scripture itself and in the Reformation polemic is against the entrenchment of tradition. To hold the regulative principle is not to hold to the primacy of tradition over contemporary ideas; it is rather to hold to the primacy of the word of God over all human ideas, whether traditional or contemporary.

This is not a lecture on worship, but I believe this point is illuminating in a more general way. Not only in worship, but also in other areas of life, it is important to know that *sola Scriptura* contains no bias in favor of the old-fashioned against the contemporary. Historically, *sola Scriptura* has *liberated* God's people from bondage to the past so that they could capture new opportunities. Of course, *sola Scriptura* also challenges contemporary ideas. But it creates a level playing field. It allows the contemporary to compete with the traditional on an equal basis. Both equally need scriptural warrant. Both equally must meet the test of *sola Scriptura*.

The Second Misunderstanding

The second misunderstanding is the complaint that *sola Scriptura* leaves no room for human creativity. Certainly, *sola*

Scriptura places some limits on human creativity. We are not permitted to do as we please; there is no autonomy over and against God's word. Thus, it might seem that the believer in *sola Scriptura* may never exercise his own judgment about anything.

But that also is certainly wrong. Indeed, every time we *use* the Bible, we use our own judgment. Reading the Bible is a rational activity, requiring human judgment. Choosing one text to study rather than another, for a particular purpose, is a rational activity. Interpreting the Bible is a rational activity, requiring a great deal of human judgment. And applying the Bible to people's needs is also an activity requiring human judgment.

The step of application is what we are most interested in now because it is at that step that we seize opportunities. Let's say we wish to address a social question as Christians. It may be the question of abortion, or nuclear war, or government welfare, or genetic engineering. Well, the Bible doesn't directly address any of these issues. Finding out what the Bible requires of us in these areas requires quite a bit of human knowledge and wisdom.

We want to find biblical *principles* that apply to these situations; but to do that requires quite a bit of extra-biblical knowledge. If you want to know what the Bible teaches about abortion, you need to know some biblical texts. But you also have to know what abortion is, and the Bible alone will not tell you.

So, when we say "Scripture *alone*," *Scriptura sola*, we don't mean that the Bible alone will give us all the facts, all the information, all the detailed knowledge we need to apply it to contemporary situations. Scripture is *not* sufficient to do *that*. For that purpose, Scripture needs to be supplemented — by human logic, human knowledge, human wisdom — so that we can make the best use of God's word.

For what, then, *is* Scripture sufficient? The answer is that it is a sufficient *rule* of faith and practice, as the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it. Scripture is the only book in the world authored by the living God. Therefore it is ultimately authoritative, and it *alone* is ultimately authoritative. As ultimate authority it is sufficient. As our ultimate authority, it judges all of our wisdom, knowledge, and logic. We may need other information to apply the Scriptures, but we don't need any more words of God.

But within the bounds that Scripture provides, there is plenty of room for the play of faithful human creativity. Indeed, Scripture *requires* us to use all our God-given gifts to apply his word.

Surely, God expects us not only to read the Bible, but to use it, to apply it to the situations of our experience. The fourth commandment says, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Well, what about operating a factory on Sunday: is that sin? Well, Scripture doesn't say anything about factories. So are we simply to set that question aside? Certainly not. Scripture wants us to apply the principle of the fourth commandment to all these issues.

To give another example: Some years ago I served on a committee in another denomination to study the question of abortion. Our committee gave to the general assembly a report which, one year before Roe v. Wade, was strongly opposed to abortion. I'm happy to say that the assembly did approve the report. But there were some in the assembly who opposed approving that report, arguing that the church should not speak about abortion at all. Why? Because the church is limited by *sola Scriptura*, and abortion is not mentioned in the Bible.

Well, it's true that abortion is not mentioned in the Bible. I believe there are passages which teach a very high view of unborn life, and of course there is the sixth commandment which says, "Thou shalt not kill." But the Bible does not mention abortion as such. But put that fact in context. The Bible says "thou shalt not kill," but it doesn't mention the killing of Presbyterian ministers between 35 and 45 years of age. So somebody might argue that although we may preach against killing in general, we may not preach against the killing of ministers between 35-45, or any other particular *kinds* of killing. The bottom line to that argument is that you can preach only generalities, not specifics. Or perhaps the conclusion of this is even more radical: you cannot apply the Bible at all, you can only read it. What these people were saying was that the church can say only those things which the Bible itself explicitly and specifically says. That would mean that we could not use the Bible at all. That would mean that we could not preach. We could only read the text.

But that certainly is not what *sola Scriptura* means. Scripture requires us not just to read it, but to *use* it, to *apply* it to all the issues that concern us today. "*Preach* the word," Paul said to Timothy.

In Matthew 22:23-33, the Sadducees asked Jesus a fairly stupid question: "A widow was married to seven brothers. To whom will she be married in the resurrection?" They thought that this question made the whole idea of resurrection look silly, and they hoped, by asking it, to make Jesus look silly, too. The critics of our abortion report might have answered by saying: Scripture does not address that question, so we must not address it either. But Jesus did not do that at all. He assumed that the word of God was not silent, even about the Sadducees' stupid question. The Scripture has an answer to it. He said to them in verse 29, "You are in error, because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." See what he is saying? The Sadducees, in asking their

question, showed ignorance of the Bible. The Bible had an answer, but they didn't know it. They were ignorant. The answer was, first, that people don't marry in the resurrection. Second, the Old Testament does teach resurrection from the dead. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is not God of the dead, but of the living. Therefore, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob still live before him. Notice that Jesus' answer went far beyond the explicit or literal words of Scripture. Jesus took several broad biblical principles and put them together, *applying* them to the Sadducees' stupid question. He also said that because the Sadducees did not do this, they were ignorant of the Bible. You see the implication? You don't even *know* the Bible unless you can apply the Bible to questions that arise outside the Bible. You don't *know* the Bible unless you can *use* it rightly.

In the first part of this essay, I mentioned the 24th chapter of Luke, where the risen Christ spoke to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. These men too were ignorant of Scripture. Jesus had to teach them, for they were foolish and slow to believe all that the prophets had spoken. What was it they didn't understand? The passage does not say that they had failed to read some passage or other. The problem of these disciples was that they had failed to see the connection between the Old Testament writings and their own experience. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had entered their experience. In their experience, he had suffered and died for sinners, but they hadn't understood because they had failed to *apply* the Old Testament prophecies to the events of their own experience. So, Jesus said they didn't understand the Scriptures. Again: you do not understand the Scriptures unless you can *apply* the Bible to extra-biblical experience.

There are many other examples of this principle. In John 5:39-40, Jesus upbraided the Jews because they searched the Scriptures, but did not believe the Scriptures' testimony to Christ.

They didn't *apply* the Scriptures rightly, so they didn't *understand* the Scriptures. In Romans 15:4, Paul said that the Scriptures, written long ago to be sure, were written for *our* learning. A remarkable statement, isn't it? Of what other book can it be said that it was written to instruct people living hundreds of years after its composition? Surely that testimony speaks to the divine character of the Scriptures. It also implies that God gave us the Bible precisely so that it could address *contemporary* issues.

Scripture, according to Paul, is "profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). That's the language of application. Scripture is given not just to be read, but to be used, to be applied, to address current issues. In 2 Timothy, Paul looked toward the day when he would be in heaven with Christ, and when the church on earth would have to carry on without him. After Paul was gone, the church would face many challenges. Paul said that false teaching would abound, and that the church would need to make judgments. The key to such judgments is Scripture, but Scripture applied intelligently to the new situations that arise, Scripture applied to extra-scriptural knowledge. Therefore, as Peter said, also looking toward the same situation, Scripture will be a "light shining in a dark place" (2 Pet. 1:19).

My conclusion is that God gave us the Bible for the purpose of *application*. To know the Bible rightly, you must not only have verses in your memory; you must also have the skill of *applying* the Bible to questions that come up *outside* the Bible, to questions that the Bible does not specifically and explicitly address, to states of affairs that are not mentioned specifically in the Bible.

This means that to understand the Bible we need to know some things from outside the Bible. To understand the Bible, of course, we need to know something of the biblical languages, of the history and geography of the biblical period. We also need to know our own time. We need to know what questions need to be addressed. We need to know some things about modern technology, modern culture, science, philosophy, art, music. We need to know our world in order to use the word of God properly. If we don't know our world, we cannot apply the word to it; and if we cannot apply the word to our own time, we don't really understand it.

So you see how *sola Scriptura* does not exclude the use of knowledge from outside the Bible. In fact, that knowledge is absolutely essential if we are to *use* the Bible to reform ourselves, our church, and our culture. *Sola Scriptura*, in fact, is a divine mandate for human creativity. Relating scriptural teachings to contemporary problems requires considerable creativity. It engages all the gifts which God has given to us.

The Third Misunderstanding

And there's another dimension to this as well, which brings us to consider the third misunderstanding of *sola Scriptura*, namely, the idea that *sola Scriptura* leaves no room for the work of the Spirit. Evaluating present-day situations is not merely a matter of relating the Bible to our extra-biblical knowledge. It is also a matter of spiritual insight, of spiritual growth.

Many Christians, especially those who are inclined toward the charismatic movement, fault the Reformed for making the Christian life too much of an intellectual exercise. To them, the *sola Scriptura* principle looks like an academic way to God. You

have a textbook; you read the textbook; you correlate it with other factual knowledge; and you act. But where is the Spirit? Where is the personal relationship between ourselves and God?

I do believe that some Reformed teachers and writers can be justly criticized in this way. The idea of the “primacy of the intellect” has been prominent among some Reformed writers, and I believe that idea is not biblical at all. But the genius of Reformed theology is not at all to turn the Christian life into a kind of academic curriculum. Above all, our relationship to God is fully personal — covenantal, as the theologians say. Learning to apply Scripture to our present opportunities is also a personal process, the process of a developing personal relationship between ourselves and God.

Let us look at a familiar passage: Romans 12:1-2. We could also look at other passages, such as Ephesians 5:8-10 and Philippians 1:9-10 where Paul used a similar pattern of argument, but we’ll stick with Romans 12 for now. In the first eleven chapters of Romans, Paul expounded very systematically, but also passionately, God’s way of salvation in Jesus Christ. Then he came to the question, “How shall we then live?” He said, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

The second verse tells us how to discover God’s will. The question “How do I discover God’s will?” is a very practical question. High school young people ask it all the time. In Reformed churches, we tend to answer by saying, “Read your Bible,” and that answer is very sound. *Sola Scriptura*; the will of God is the content of the Bible. But as we have seen, finding the

will of God in the Bible and relating it to our life situations can be rather complicated. It is not just a matter of reading. It is also a matter of understanding our own times in the light of Scripture. And what Paul tells us here is that it is also a matter of spiritual transformation. It is when by God's grace we offer our bodies as living sacrifices, turning away from worldly patterns of behavior, that we come to know, and take delight in, the will of God.

1 Corinthians 2:14 tells us that the "natural man," the unregenerate person, cannot rightly understand the word of God. The word is foolishness to him, and of course his ideas are foolish to God. But when God transforms a person by his Spirit into his image, a whole new way of thinking develops. Paul calls that in 1 Corinthians 2:16 "the mind of Christ." Rightly understanding and using God's word, therefore, is a spiritual process, an ethical process, the outgrowth of our personal relationship with God.

It is those who walk with God who are able to discern God's will for their lives. Perhaps that seems backwards to you. You might think that one must know God's will before one can obey him. Didn't J. Gresham Machen say that doctrine comes first, and then life is built on doctrine?

But of course it works both ways. Obedience is built on knowledge, but knowledge is also built on obedience. Knowledge contributes to obedience; obedience contributes to knowledge.

It sounds paradoxical, but we know how it works, don't we? We've all experienced it. Regeneration comes first; that's good Reformed doctrine. The first change in us is not something we do, but something God does. Unless a man is born again, he shall not see the kingdom of heaven. Regeneration creates both new knowledge and new obedience. The knowledge feeds on the obedience and the obedience feeds on the knowledge. Our

knowledge of God's word helps us to obey him. But as we continue to obey him, over and over, overcoming temptation, going through trials in a godly way, we find ourselves thinking differently. New patterns of thought develop. With new habits of life come new habits of thought. We look at Scripture in a new way, and our knowledge grows. That leads to more obedience and more knowledge, on and on.

Hebrews 5:11-14 tells us a bit about this process. The writer here intended to enter a rather difficult theological discussion concerning Melchizedek and his relation to Christ. He paused, however, to observe that his readers were not quite ready for this teaching. They were "slow to learn." They should have been teachers themselves, but at this point they needed someone else to teach them the elementary truths of God's word all over again. They need milk, not solid food. Who subsists on milk? Babies, of course. The Hebrews were spiritual babies, or theological babies we might say, since they were not ready for heavy, though valuable, theological teaching.

Well, who are the mature? Are they the ones with more book learning, with academic doctorates and the like? Surprisingly not. The mature, the ones who can take the solid food, the meaty theology, are those "who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14).

Notice that maturity here is ethical in character rather than merely intellectual. Theologically mature people are people who are ethically mature, who are able to make proper distinctions between good and evil. And from where does that ethical maturity come? From "exercise" (*gymnazein*). From "constant use."

Theologically mature people are not necessarily the most academically astute. They are, rather, the ones who have been on the front lines of the battle against Satan and sin and death.

They are the ones who have fought the good fight. When you seek a fellow believer's help in discerning the will of God for your life, those are the people you should approach. Don't go to the smarty-pants types whose sole accomplishment has been a good grade point average in college and seminary. Go to the people whose devotion to Christ you have come to admire: those who have made sacrifices for the kingdom; those who have suffered some persecution and ridicule; those who have been tested and, by God's grace, have prevailed.

When Scripture sets forth the qualifications for elders in the church, it demands people of this kind: above reproach, sexually pure, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not lovers of money, managing their own families well, having good reputations with outsiders (1 Tim. 3:1-7). There isn't much there on academics, except perhaps for the ability to teach; but even there the emphasis is less on academic preparation than on the ability to communicate.

To summarize: We now know how to discern opportunities, to evaluate options set before us. First, there is God's word, our sufficient final authority. Second, there is the work of applying that word to contemporary situations. Third, there is the work of the Spirit which transforms our lives and our minds so that we can make reliable judgments in the work of application. Next time, we will explore some examples.