

FWS Chairman's Letter: September 2005

What does *Sola Scriptura* mean for modern Anglican debates?

By [Simon Vibert](#)

Sola Scriptura is one of the 5 rallying cries of the Reformation meaning: "Scripture alone". By this, the Reformers meant that Councils, Bishops and Synods have no authority to overrule the Scriptures, for Scripture is to be supreme in the Church. For a start, we must say, *Sola Scriptura* is at the heart of the Anglican understanding of the Bible:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation (Article 6)

The concept of *Sola Scriptura* is particularly associated with Martin Luther who asserted that to hear or read the Scripture is nothing less than to hear God (Packer 'Sola Scriptura' in *History and Today*, p.122). Most famous is Luther's statement in 1521 at Worms:

Unless I am convinced by testimonies of Scripture or evident reason – for I believe nether the Pope nor Councils alone, since it is established that they have often erred and contradicted themselves - I am the prisoner of the Scriptures cited by me, and my conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God; I neither can nor will recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen.

Whilst it is true that Luther did not use the words "inerrant" or "infallible", RC Sproul is surely right to articulate Luther's view of Scripture in these terms:

For Luther, the Sola of "Sola Scriptura" was inseparably related to the Scriptures' unique inerrancy. It was because popes could and did err and because councils could and did err that Luther came to realize the supremacy of Scripture. Luther did not despise church authority, nor did he repudiate church councils as having no value. His praise of the Council of Nicea is noteworthy. Luther and the Reformers did not mean by "Sola Scriptura" that the Bible is the only authority in the church; rather, they meant that the Bible is the only infallible authority in the church.

Luther's emphasis was echoed by the 16th Century Anglican Richard Hooker in his teaching that scripture is adequate for its divinely given purpose, namely to show the way of salvation, but not to prescribe for all aspects of life, as some of the puritans insisted. (Paul Avis, <http://www.centres.ex.ac.uk/CSCC/Interpreting%20Authority%20%20Paul%20Avis.htm>). It is here that modern Anglican debate rages.

The 3-legged stool

This is a phrase that is often associated with Richard Hooker, namely, that the doctrine of the Church stands upon the three legs of Scripture, Reason and Tradition. However Hooker did not actually use the phrase, but did use a more subtle analogy of the 3-fold cord, which sees Scripture, Reason and Tradition as intertwined and, presumably, inseparable.

Reason, for both Hooker and Luther meant the clarity of Scripture, accessible through human thought. Revisionist moderns have taken "Reason" to refer to rational thinking over against the implied obscurity or irrelevancy of Scriptures. Hooker would agree with the Reformed stance that Scripture is perspicuous in everything it speaks about and Church decisions should be subject to the "plain reading" of the text. Reason, after all is a gift of God which enables us to understand God's plan for life through, not separate from, Scripture (see *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book V, 8:2).

The problem with 3-legged stool analogy is that it implies that each leg bears equal weight and each are equally indispensable. This is not true for the Protestant and Reformed understanding of the relationships between Scripture, Reason and Tradition, as the famous Luther quote above illustrates. Moreover, because our thinking is fallen, and because our human culture is fallen, and because our human experiences are fallen, neither reason, tradition nor experience should ever be put over the unfallen and absolute trustworthiness of Scripture.

Via Media

This is another phrase, which I think, is read into Hooker by later tractarians. It is true to say that Hooker saw Anglicanism, not as half way between Rome and Protestantism, but perhaps more finely distinguished between Puritan and Reformation thought. The latter would see Scripture as containing all things necessary for salvation (hence article 6 above), the former as seeing Scripture as guiding all of life. Hence the Puritan "regulative principle" for worship, for example.

Nigel Atkinson argues that Hooker's reverence for tradition was similar to Luther and Calvin. For example, the episcopacy can be argued for, not least because it has existed for 1500 years. If it is not proved contrary to Scripture, then it should be recognised, not as the *esse* of the Church, but as the *bene esse* of the Church (*Richard Hooker and the Authority of Scripture, Tradition and Reason*, p.131). But, for example, because Tradition is the consensus of the universal, historic Church it should put the brakes on moves to consecrate women to the Episcopacy, not only because Scripture has nothing positive to say about women in this position of authority, but also because of the weight of Tradition.

Many modern movements, from the standpoint of Scripture, would be, not just unscriptural, but *irrational* (contra Reason) and *unconventional* (contra Tradition). Experience and Reason may never be used to justify unbiblical or untraditional decisions in the councils of the Church.

It concerns me that decisions - or revisions - made in the Church are often justified through a misunderstanding of how the supposed "3-legged stool" is thought to operate. Of particular concern is the idea that fallen human reason seems to think that it knows better than Scripture. In addition, developments in human thinking and tradition appear to be taken to override the Divine order for human life.

If it is true that we retain the Anglican commitment to *Sola Scriptura*, I feel bound to ask:

1) Is it clear from Scripture, Reason and Tradition that women should be ordained to the Episcopacy?

There are many of us who do not believe that it is clear that women should be so consecrated. At the very least, therefore, it requires that we fight for adequate and permanent provision, and I urge you to sign the enclosed petition (more on this in a moment). Wallace Benn has made the distinction between first order and second order issues with respect to the proposals to ordain women to the Episcopacy. I believe he is right to say that, whilst the consecration of women as bishops is a second order issue (in-so-far-as Church polity is not a first order issue), the implications for our view of Scripture and how God continues to guide the Church today, throw up first order issues.

2) Is it plain from Scripture, Reason and Tradition that the House of Bishops recent Pastoral Statement about same-sex partnerships is right?

I think that the recent statement from the House of Bishops responding to changes in legislation concerning homosexual partnerships is ultimately unhelpful and adds to the obfuscation caused by the way the debate is handled. For this reason I signed a letter of support to Archbishop Peter Akinola printed below.

Please take time to read the two items included in this Newslink. First, there is the text of the letter, which we sent to Peter Akinola. Secondly, you will find the wording of a petition, which I hope that you will sign. Please notice that the emphasis of the petition particularly resonates with Article 6 cited above. At the very least, should it not be acknowledged that the debate about women in the episcopacy has not reached clarity from Scripture, Reason and Tradition in favour of women being ordained into the Episcopate? For this reason, I urge you to persuade Synod to make permanent provision for those who feel that the Denomination is acting contrary to “consciences bound by the word of God”.

Yours in Christ,

Simon Vibert
Chairman Fellowship of Word and Spirit

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