

Why Not Scripture Alone? by Pastor Marty

A few years ago, a Southern pastor with insomnia was scrolling through television stations at 2 o'clock in the morning, hoping to find something boring enough to help him fall asleep. In the process, he came across a popular health-and-wealth television ministry where the televangelist was declaring that anyone who donated to the ministry could expect to receive a special blessing from God. The pastor disliked the idea of asking for money in exchange for a miracle, and being even less likely to fall back asleep, he posted his concerns about the practice on his Facebook page. In the post, he asked his 37 friends to respond with their opinions. Without his knowledge, one of his friends shared the post with his friends, one of whom was a blogger, and in a period of a few days, the post had gone viral. The pastor was unaware of it until it showed up in his Twitter account after being re-tweeted almost 30,000 times. Before he knew what was happening, CNN had reported on the story, stating that the pastor wanted to put the television ministry out of business. The pastor, having never said such a thing, called the network to object to the fake news, but by that time, the legal team for the ministry had issued a cease-and-desist letter and filed a lawsuit for slander and libel. Before anyone knew what had happened, thousands of followers were defending the pastor while thousands more were protesting outside his house. In short order, a simple early-morning Facebook post led to a church rivalry that made the cover of Time and Newsweek. The pastor and the televangelist eventually met on the Oprah Winfrey show, but the situation had escalated so much by then that any resolution was impossible.

Sometimes hugely significant results develop from entirely unintentional events.

By now, you may realize this story is an analogy: the southern pastor was a German monk named Martin Luther, the Facebook post was the list of 95 theses nailed to a door in Wittenburg, the television ministry was the Roman Catholic Church, the donations were for indulgences, and the unintended result was the Protestant Reformation. Many historians describe Luther as holding animus against Catholicism, but this could not be more wrong. During his time as priest and teacher, he had come to hold such devotion to the Christian faith that he became deeply distressed at the suggestion that people could purchase forgiveness from God. Luther himself had struggled deeply with receiving forgiveness from God, sometimes going to confession several times a day. It was while studying the book of Romans that he realized forgiveness involved faith as well as repentance; he found peace and fully understood the purpose of the confessional. From that point on, he championed the benefit of confessing sin and receiving forgiveness. As such, he found it horrifying to hear people in the town suddenly declaring a belief that they no longer needed to confess their sins because they had bought full forgiveness for past, present, and future sins. Whether or not the Roman Catholic Church actually intended that interpretation, that is precisely how many people viewed indulgences and what some of the traveling priests were proclaiming. Out of an honest desire to protect the integrity of the church, he wrote a response to those claims, hoping for clarification and correction. Without his knowledge, the local press copied the 95 theses on a brand new Guttenberg printing press and circulated it far and wide. By the time he learned of it, the media had fashioned a scandal, putting Luther and the Pope on opposing sides of the issue of truth. The resulting schism was never Luther's intention, and more than one Pope has since admitted that Luther accurately pointed out issues that needed to be addressed.

Many Roman Catholic popes and theologians have validated Luther's concerns.

The Protestant Reformation developed out of a reaction to what many perceived as significant errors in the Roman Catholic Church. As is often the case, however, a theological framework that arises out of reaction to another can tend to over-compensate. The pendulum may swing from one extreme to another until it finally finds orthodox equilibrium. This was often seen in the first few centuries of the Church when reactions to one heresy resulted in an opposing theological position that eventually was also identified as heresy. One example of this is Montanism, a perceived elevation of certain self-proclaimed prophets in the early Church, which resulted in a suspicion toward spiritual gifts that then opened the gates to Cessationism, a denial of the work, person, and nature of the Holy Spirit. Of course, such over-reactions did not always happen, but they have taken place often enough that there is value in evaluating the potential whenever a theological split occurs. In the case of the Protestant Reformation, there were instances where some followers of Luther went to extremes that even Luther found abhorrent and publicly denounced; in essence, they threw out the proverbial baby with the baptismal water. On the other hand, some responses do not qualify as error, but they have perhaps gone a bit too far in the opposite direction—at least as far as sound practice is concerned. Just as some Roman Catholics have taken an orthodox teaching of the early Church and turned it into something problematic, so also some Protestants have taken teachings of the early reformers and made them into something questionable. I believe one such issue is in the concept of *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture Alone.

Some Protestants have embraced the idea of *Sola Scriptura* to an unhealthy degree.

Going back to the 15th century, the Roman Catholic hierarchy considered its authority to be so infallible that disagreement with institutional decrees could be grounds for excommunication or death. Followers were expected to consider church declarations and Christian theology as synonymous with each other even if the former contradicted the latter. In most cases, Church councils corrected abuses and clarified teachings, resulting in Catholic-based renewals and reformations. This was precisely what Luther intended to initiate with his 95 theses. However, leaders within the institutional church during his lifetime were not willing to consider his objections—largely due to the way the media had inflamed the issue—and they commanded that he recant all of his writings, including those based on the book of Romans and the works of St. Augustine. In other words, they demanded unequivocal concession without consideration for those things that clearly coincided with Roman Catholic theology and Scripture. In response to this untenable stipulation, Luther declared that “Scripture alone” should be the final authority in all matters of faith and life. In response to an unacceptable extreme on one side, Luther created a problematic extreme on the other. The concept of *Sola Scriptura* created a situation where every person became an ultimate authority on what is correct interpretation of Scripture. It quickly became apparent that people could place their interpretation of Scripture over Scripture itself, refusing to yield to informed counsel. As personal interpretations led to increasing deviations from orthodoxy, Calvin attempted to define stipulations and guidelines on good Christian doctrine; however, the idea that “a simple man with Scripture has more authority than a Pope or council” had made it profoundly easy for every person to reject any and all negative judgments of personal interpretation. In essence, the concept of *Sola Scriptura* led to the problematic situation where every person could consider personal interpretations of Scripture as THE one correct interpretation of Scripture. One need only look back at the 500 years since the Reformation to see literally thousands of denomination and church splits over both major and minor differences in scriptural interpretations—and many are them are so diametrically opposed to each other that there is no possible way they could all be correct.

****Sola Scriptura* opened a door for everyone to claim correct interpretation of Scripture.***

Luther was not wrong to declare that Scripture must hold precedence over all human claims for authority, for even Jesus Himself often deferred to written Scripture when it came to judgments; if He did not claim superiority over Scripture while on earth (though He clearly had it), then certainly nobody else can. However, the concept of “Scripture Alone” unintentionally dismissed the need for recognizing that individual interpretation could be tainted by personal biases, assumptions, and preconceptions. Paul tried to counter this universal tendency by declaring that neglecting the assembling together with others under an ordained spiritual authority was inherently foolish. All people have blind spots where they deceive themselves or overlook personal weaknesses. The idea of “iron sharpening iron” itself promotes the need for others in our lives. A danger for many congregations today is that they tend to attract those with the same beliefs; in effect, they group with others with the same blind spots. We have probably all met some who consider themselves “Lone Ranger” Christians, who think they can follow God without being consistent members of a larger congregation; usually, this is followed by a tendency to view their theology as “truly correct.” When a pastor disagrees with them or calls out their behavior as inappropriate, they leave for greener pastures. Of course, there certainly are situations in which people need to leave a church because of unhealthy circumstances or problematic theology, but when leaving is the norm—or being their own church group is the rule—it is usually a sign of trouble.

If leaving is the norm or doing church separately is the rule, it is a sign of trouble.

In this newsletter, I want to suggest an alternative to *Sola Scriptura*. As mentioned, Luther was not wrong to resist submitting to a position that had become contradictory to Scripture and Christian orthodoxy. However, making every person a “final authority” when it comes to deciding what is the correct interpretation of Scripture is not the best alternative, either. Based upon his life and teachings, I think that our interpretation of “*Sola Scriptura*” is perhaps slightly different than what Luther himself intended. Even when he had completely separated from the Roman Catholic Church and had become a leader of the Protestant Church, he recognized and affirmed many of the sacraments, doctrines, and practices of Roman Catholicism. He did so because he recognized that separating completely from the teachings and traditions of the Church Fathers was unwise. I would suggest that we might come closer to what the Protestant Reformation intended—a reformation and renewal of the Catholic (Universal) Church—by holding to the concept of *Prima Scriptura*: Scripture is the Primary authority for faith and life. This concept proclaims the importance of the larger body of believers as well as recognizes the historic teachings “that were handed down from the beginning” while still recognizing that Scripture is the only thing that can have final authority when contradictions might arise between what one group or person might say compared to another. *Prima Scriptura* suggests that we all should have the humility to accept that it is a dangerous thing to consider ourselves right and everyone else wrong.

Prima Scriptura includes the humility to accept that exclusivity is a dangerous thing.

In a sense, my hope would be that the concept of *Prima Scriptura* could become a point of agreement between the Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations. Perhaps it is possible that the Church as a whole could come together to recognize that tradition and reason are necessary while still understanding that inspired Scripture is the only perfect standard given to us from God. On the one side, any honest student of Roman Catholic history has to admit that corruption and error did affect the institution at certain times, especially during the medieval period; on the other side, any honest student of Protestant history acknowledges that not every person or denomination benefits by a claim to the “correct” interpretation of Scripture. Perhaps we can all learn from those who went before us.