A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

*A*t its best, a sense of tradition informed by a grasp of the successes and failures of Christians who have gone before us is vital today. At its worst, traditionalism fails to distinguish between biblical principles for ministry and cultural methods for implementing those principles. Traditionalism clings to dated ineffective methods in the name of staying truer to tradition than to Scripture.

*T*he result of traditionalism is a Christianity that has all of the right answers to all of the wrong questions, because the questions that were once pressing are no longer asked.

MARK DRISCOLL

UNLESS I AM CONVINCED BY SCRIPTURE AND PLAIN REASON....

MARTIN, WILL YOU JUST TAKE THE TRASH OUT AND QUIT MAKING SUCH AN ISSUE OF IT?

Is "Sola Scriptura" Self-Referentially Incoherent?

Steve West

*S*cholars of all varieties and religious convictions are attempting today to grapple with the difficult task of constructing a viable worldview. While articulating and formulating the parameters of a particular worldview is no easy task, certain generally accepted ground rules and tests exist to help judge the validity of a given worldview. Some tests are comparative and adjudicate the truth claims of competing worldviews against each other. Other tests are intra-worldview in their focus and investigate the merits and claims of a worldview on the basis of its own internal data. One such test, or evaluative tool, is the test of coherence. This test is concerned with studying the claims of one worldview to ensure that the claims do not rule each other out or combine to present a principle that is incoherent.

The test of coherence can be applied to metanarrative structures, or it can be applied to narrative structures. Two narrative structures can be individually coherent, but when combined into a metanarrative structure, they might be incoherent. To use a fictitious example, one might tell the story of Smitty, a redheaded boy who likes coffee. Later, one might tell a story in which a blond-haired boy named Hartley hates coffee. Internally, these two narratives are both coherent. Yet, if they were to be combined into an anthological metanarrative in which one of the major truth claims was either that all boys

like coffee or that all boys hate coffee, the inclusion of both narratives would introduce incoherence. A test for incoherence has nothing to do with a test for truth. Whether it is true or false that all boys like coffee or that all boys hate coffee is irrelevant. Two propositions can be factually false and still be coherent. That is why the test for coherence is simply one test of a worldview, not the exclusive test.

There are times when one narrative, or one proposition, is itself incoherent without being combined with anything else to produce this dissonance. These statements are termed "self-referentially incoherent." One example is the sentence, "This sentence is a false sentence." When that sentence is read, it is claiming to be false. If the sentence is false, then the claim made in the sentence is true. If the claim made in the sentence is wrong, then the sentence is true. Either way, if the sentence is wrong, it is true, and if it is right, it is false. When the sentence refers to itself it is incoherent. Popular examples could be multiplied *ad infinitum*. One such example will suffice. On the Oprah Winfrey Show in the past year, the hostess asked one famous actress what she knew for sure. The actress replied that one could not know anything for sure (and then forgetting her own axiom proceeded to say something she knew for sure). This common thought, that one cannot know anything for sure, fails if it is true. To claim that one *can't* know anything for sure is to predicate something of truth and people that is sure. If you know that you cannot know anything for sure, your knowledge of this uncertainty is a denial of your statement. This is self-referentially incoherent.

This brief discussion sets the stage for the question as to whether or not the Reformation expression *sola scriptura* is self-referentially incoherent. One notable Roman Catholic scholar, Peter Kreeft, argues that it is. His argument is stated informally this way:

> *Sola scriptura* is self-contradictory, for it says we should believe only Scripture, but Scripture never says this! If we believe only what Scripture teaches, we will not believe *sola scriptura*, for Scripture does not teach *sola scriptura*.[1]

Kreeft clearly states that he finds *sola scriptura* to be self-referentially incoherent, a denial of itself. His critique necessarily locates the Reformers and their descendants at the center of this problem: if you choose to go only with Scripture, then you cannot maintain this choice as scriptural.

In order for Kreeft's objection to be sustained, two propositions have to be validated. First, the Reformers must have meant, as he presents their meaning, that *sola scriptura* means only that which is in the Bible is to be believed. Second, if Kreeft is correct in interpreting the Reformers this way, then it must be further demonstrated that the Scriptures do not teach *sola scriptura*. If Kreeft has erred in his understanding of the Reformers' meaning, then his case is not necessarily valid (depending on what the Reformers' true meaning is), but if *sola scriptura* is in fact a biblical doctrine, then his assertions are simply wrong.

First, then, what did the Reformers mean by *sola scriptura*? In an investigation into the effect of *sola scriptura* in history and the theological method, John Frame remarks: "My overall purpose here is to reiterate the Reformation doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, the doctrine that Scripture alone gives us ultimate norms for doctrine and life."[2] This connotative statement of what *sola scriptura* means differs from Kreeft's presentation by a large margin. Kreeft stated that this phrase meant that only that which is in the Bible is to be believed, whereas Frame states that its meaning is that only Scripture is the ultimate standard and authority for orthodoxy and orthopraxy. J. I. Packer has written on this subject at some length, and his conclusions drawn from the primary sources of the Reformers' own writings decidedly agree with Frame's interpretation.[3]

The reality is that the Reformers meant by *sola scriptura* the truth that only the Scripture is the written verbal revelation of God. Since it is the Word of God, it is to stand in judgment upon all human teachings and ideas. Scripture as the Word of God has the attribute of authority. It is the final court of appeal. Obviously this does not entail that one cannot know anything apart from its being revealed in Scripture. It is too pedantic by half to argue that this means we cannot know that

three times four is twelve because the Scriptures do not include a multiplication table.

It would seem then that Kreeft should have been more precise in his statement. It should perhaps be noted that the book from which his remarks are taken is a non-technical work on many different subjects. It also has the commendable qualities of being often warm and insightful. The disagreement here, however, is over whether or not *sola scriptura* is self-contradictory or self-referentially incoherent, and that is not a minor issue. Taking the true Reformed understanding of *sola scriptura*, that the Scriptures alone are the ultimate standard for the faith and practice of the believer, the question then remains as to whether or not this view is attested and taught in the Scriptures themselves, or whether this is a view foreign to the Scriptures, foisted upon them by disaffected Catholics in the sixteenth century.

That the Scriptural self-attestation consists of an exemplary view of itself is not in doubt. Famous texts include:

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." (2 Timothy 3:16–17 KJV)

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul." (Psalm 19:7 NIV)

"Sanctify them by the truth: your word is truth." (John 17:17 NIV)

"To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." (Isaiah 8:20 KJV)

Without engaging in polemics, it is clear to see from this short cross section of verses that the Scriptures are inspired by God, that they are true, that they function to sanctify and perfect the believer, and that all other "lights" are really dark if they do not speak according to the Word of God. Commenting on Isaiah 8:20, Calvin says:

Hence we learn that everything that is added to the word must be condemned and rejected. It is the will of the Lord that we shall depend wholly on his word, and that our knowledge shall be confined within its limits; and therefore, if we lend our ears to others, we take a liberty which he has forbidden, and offer to him a gross insult. Everything that is introduced by men on their own authority will be nothing else than a corruption of the word; and consequently, if we wish to obey God, we must reject all other instructors.[4]

Two points can be made at this juncture. First, Calvin was aware that he was writing a commentary when he wrote this paragraph, so his comment about rejecting all other authorities and confining knowledge to the limits of Scripture is not a denial of the usefulness of earthly teachers. Teachers and preachers are a gift to the church. Calvin is arguing that only the Word of God is authoritative, and that it stands in judgment on all other opinions and instruction. Second, Isaiah does not forbid the canonical development and the expansion of the Scriptures. It is important to note that as Isaiah the prophet wrote chapter eight, he was at that moment expanding the content of the Scriptures, since what he wrote was the very word of God! When Christ comes and commissions his apostles to write the New Testament, they do not contradict the Word of God, but rather bring it to completion.

For the Reformers, as for their descendants, *sola scriptura* means that only the Word of God is authoritative and purely true. This is because it is God's word and not the fallible and errant opinions of men. But Kreeft and other like-minded Roman Catholics fall into error when they argue that *sola scriptura* is self-referentially incoherent because, they argue, the Scriptures do not teach this position. On the contrary, the Scriptures clearly teach that the Word of God alone is perfect and the ultimate standard of all things. The Reformers and the Protestant Church therefore reject, for numerous reasons, the idea that the pope has the ability to speak the very words of God *ex cathedra*. Scripture alone means that only the Scriptures are the word of God, and so the deposit of the Scriptures

can be the only body of teaching that is authoritative today.

The two-word phrases of the Reformation, *sola scriptura, sola gratia, solo fide, solo Christo*, are obviously shorthand. They beg to be unpacked. *Sola scriptura*, as has been demonstrated above, means that whatever God speaks is the authoritative and ultimate standard, and the word of God is coextensive with the Scriptures. In the Scriptures alone is the verbal revelation of God, and so *sola scriptura*, only Scripture, the Scriptures alone, are the infallible guide and authority in the life of the Christian. When the phrase is unpacked with just the smallest bit of sensitivity to the Reformers' intent, it clearly passes the test of self-coherence. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

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Notes

1. Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 275.

2. John Frame, "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on *Sola Scriptura* and History in Theological Method," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 269.

3. See J. I. Packer, "*Sola Scriptura* in History and Today," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Newburgh, Ind.: Trinity Press, 1974), 43–62.

4. John Calvin, "Isaiah 1–32," *Calvin's Commentaries Volume VII*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 1:290.