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A single line of the Bible has consoled me more than all the books I have ever read.

IMMANUEL KANT

The Bible redirects my will, cleanses my emotions, enlightens my mind, and quickens my total being.

E. STANLEY JONES

Nothing has affected the rise and fall of civilization, the character of cultures, the structure of governments, and the lives of inhabitants of this planet as profoundly as the words of the Bible.

CHARLES COLSON

The idea of written directives from God himself as a basis for godly living goes back to God's act of inscribing the Decalogue on stone tablets and then prompting Moses to write his laws and the history of his dealings with his people. Digesting and living by this material was always central to true devotion in Israel for both leaders and ordinary people. The principle that all must be governed by the Scriptures, that is, by the Old Testament and New Testaments taken together, is equally basic to Christianity.

JAMES I. PACKER

TWO PARADIGMS FOR ADHERENTS OF *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

P. Andrew Sandlin

The Protestant Reformation unwaveringly emphasized *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone. Certain portions of the late medieval church had posited (whether explicitly or implicitly) ecclesiastical tradition as an independent source of authority. The reformers opposed this: for example, Mariology, veneration of the saints, purgatory, and indulgences had no part in the Bible's revelation. To hold, as Rome did, that they comprised ingredients of the Christian Faith was to undercut the Gospel. The Latin slogan *sola scriptura* meant that the Bible alone is the church's sole, ultimate authority. All other authorities—Church, state, parents, and so on—do not speak a divine word. Each holds only a derivative authority, subordinate to the Sacred Scriptures.¹

It is commonly held by both Protestants and Roman Catholics alike that *sola scriptura* was an innovation the Reformers introduced into Western Christianity. Actually, this is not the case at all. There was wide acceptance of *sola scriptura* in certain sectors of the late medieval church.² Unfortunately, there was also the viewpoint against which the Reformers were reacting—ecclesiastical tradition as a separate, independent authority.

At the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic answer to the Protestant Reformation, the Latin church codified the "two-source" theory of revelational authority: both the Sacred Scriptures and unwritten tradition handed down in the Church were deemed equally authoritative.³ It is this

theory which the original Protestants and their successors vigorously opposed. To embrace the “two-source” theory of divine revelation, they believed, was to erase the Creator-creature distinction.⁴ This is the great error of Tridentine Roman Catholicism, and it is parallel to its twin, salvation by both faith *and* works. Both erase the Creator-creature distinction. This is a dangerous form of *synergism*. The Protestants recognized that man and God cooperate no more in salvation than they do in revelation. God’s *revelation* to man is an absolute revelation in whose origin man does not cooperate. God’s *salvation* of man is an absolute salvation in whose origin man does not cooperate. Man is the *object* of both revelation and salvation, not the *subject*. *Sola scriptura* guards the Creator-creature distinction as it relates to God’s objective revelation to man in the Bible.⁵

REFORMERS, NOT REVOLUTIONARIES

In contesting Rome’s “two-source” theory of revelation, the reformers were by no means arguing that the Western church’s doctrine was altogether erroneous. The reformers were just that—reformers, not revolutionaries. They were quite willing to affirm the inherited ecumenical orthodoxy of the Latin Church, for instance. The reformers were all Trinitarians, and affirmed the dogma of the ecumenical councils.⁶ They did this not because they acknowledged the ultimate authority of church councils, but because they believed that these early ecumenical councils expressed Biblical teachings on the core elements of Christianity.

RADICALS, NOT REFORMERS

This distinguished the Protestant Reformation from the so-called Radical Reformation, the Anabaptists, the Unitarians, and so on.⁷ These latter also affirmed a sort of *sola scriptura*. To them, it meant that the Bible alone is our authority and, *therefore*, orthodox Christianity is suspect.

Many of the radical reformers questioned or denied the Trinity. The reformers rightly found this abhorrent—no less abhorrent, and perhaps more abhorrent, than the “two-source” theory of revelation by Rome. While Rome believed in a “two-source” theory of revelation, the radical reformers believed in no tradition of any kind. The Protestants, however, believed in a *biblical* tradition. A tradition gaining great currency in the Church that flows out of the Sacred Scriptures themselves is authoritative because it is biblical.⁸ Therefore, the reformers and their successors did not deny a positive role to tradition. In fact, Lutheran theologian, Martin Chemnitz, in his massive refutation of the Council of Trent, conspicuously acknowledged this crucial role of tradition.⁹ So did the Protestant Irish Articles of Religion, which explicitly affirmed the early ecumenical creeds.¹⁰ John Calvin himself arranged his great systematic theology, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, around the Apostles Creed. All of the early Protestants argued in favor of ancient catholic orthodoxy.

REGULA FIDEI

This understanding of the Bible’s authority and the godly ecclesiastical tradition that flows out of it created a particular standard of interpretation, a *regula fidei*, or rule of faith. This was a certain traditional *way* of interpreting the Bible. Luther, Calvin, and other reformers gleaned great nuggets from the Word of God that had been obscured by the highly static exegesis of the late medieval period. For one thing, they recovered the Pauline-Augustinian doctrine of justification by faith alone. But they were not revolutionaries. They believed in a *traditional* exegesis bounded by ancient catholic orthodoxy.

This is exactly what the patristic church had held. It did not hold the later Roman Catholic idea of Scripture and tradition as separate sources of authority, but neither did it

hold the Radical Reformation view that the Bible overthrows all tradition. It held that the Bible alone is our ultimate objective authority, but that there is a legitimate, *traditional* way of interpreting the Bible.¹¹

HERMENEUTICS

Today we hear a great deal about “hermeneutics.” This is really just a sophisticated term for interpretation—usually, the interpretation of the Bible. Even among those who hold to the highest view of the Bible’s formal authority, there is great disagreement on its interpretation. I refer not mainly to the conclusions of that interpretation, for instance, Calvinism versus Arminianism, amillennialism versus postmillennialism, dispensationalism versus covenant theology, and infant baptism versus professors’ baptism. Rather, I refer more fundamentally to the rules that govern interpretation itself. Different views of these rules lead to different interpretations of specific passages of the Bible and to different theological views.

Some hold that the Bible must be interpreted in its original historical context (as best as we today can ascertain that) and have a single intended meaning. Others agree that it should be interpreted in its original historical context, but hold to a *sensus plenior*: It can have more than one intended meaning. Still others hold that all interpretation must be *canonically* contextual—that is, the entire Bible is the context within which a single text is interpreted. Still others are less committed to the specific historical meaning at the time the Bible was penned than to an ultimate, general meaning that God intended to transcend any particular historical situation. Some even wish to distinguish between meaning and significance! These are only a few of the hermeneutical “options” among those who affirm the infallibility of the Bible. Among those who do not affirm the infallibility of the Bible, the hermeneutical options are,

unfortunately, even greater.

HISTORIC VERSUS INNOVATIVE EXEGESIS

More basic and more crucial than any of these differences is that great distinction among Protestant interpreters between those who embrace the original Protestant view, that is, a traditional *way* of interpreting the Bible, and those who have sided, intentionally or not, with the Radical Reformation, which does not recognize the bounds of orthodoxy in the interpretative endeavor. For purposes of classification, we may label these views as *historic* exegesis and *innovative* exegesis. Of course, those who embrace historic exegesis do not deny the permissibility—or even the necessity—of all exegetical innovation. They simply oppose innovation *that would overturn orthodox Christianity*.¹² Similarly, adherents of innovative exegesis do not wish to throw Christian orthodoxy overboard; they may hold to certain orthodox tenets, but the crucial point is that they are willing to subject those tenets to what they consider contrary exegetical evidence.

PROTESTANT LIBERALISM

Some examples will suffice. Protestant liberals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries embraced an assertedly “neutral,” “objective,” “scientific” form of grammatical-historical exegesis, that is finding out what the Scriptures meant when they were originally written. Almost all liberal exegetes were committed to this approach.¹³ These liberal Protestants were quite willing, if necessary, to throw overboard essential tenets of orthodox Christianity—the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible, and so on—if the conclusions of their grammatical-historical exegesis warranted this abandonment. Superficially, they seemed to be carrying on the best tradition of the Protestant reformers, who lent great

weight to the original meaning of biblical passages and their historic context. What the liberal Protestants did not share with the Protestant reformers, however, was a commitment to orthodox Christianity. Therefore, they were quite willing to overturn orthodox Christianity on the cutting table of grammatical-historical exegesis. The modern liberal Protestant, James Barr, has suggested that this is merely the consistent outcome of the grammatical-historical exegesis employed by the original reformers.¹⁴ Whatever may be the merit of that suggestion, it is certain that the reformers themselves would have found it abhorrent. They were categorically devoted to orthodox Christianity and would have found it astounding that Biblical exegesis may overturn orthodox Christianity. That, however, is precisely the viewpoint of the literal innovative exegetes.

SECTARIANISM

A more conservative version surfaced among those who are willing to throw the Christian creeds overboard if they are convinced those creeds can be shown at variance with the Bible's teaching. A most flagrant example of this was Alexander Campbell, founder of the so-called "Church of Christ":

I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me . . . and as much on my guard against reading them to-day, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever.¹⁵

This is an astounding statement, but quite consistent if one denies the need for a traditional method of interpreting the Bible.

CONSISTENT PRETERISM

Another example of innovative exegesis is in the so-called "consistent Preterist" school of recent years. Most of its supporters are willing to jettison the physical second coming of Christ and the physical resurrection of the saints, holding that these events occurred in or about the destruction in A.D. 70.¹⁶ This clearly deviates from the Christian doctrine expressed in the early ecumenical creeds, and the "consistent Preterists" acknowledge this deviation. They argue, however, that this deviation is justified on the ground that the Bible, in fact, requires just such a deviation.

There is no longer a traditional method of interpreting the Bible among the *innovative* exegetes; each exegete, as long as he practices his craft properly, is free to arrive at any conclusions, as long as he can justify them biblically.

HISTORIC EXEGESIS

The *historic* exegetes find this approach most troubling—even dangerous. While they uncompromisingly embrace *sola scriptura*, and oppose Rome's "two-source" theory of revelation, they equally oppose the idea that a few isolated individuals should be permitted to overthrow the time-tested understanding of Scripture. In Thomas Sowell's notable language, they embrace the "constrained vision" of humanity.¹⁷ This is the idea that knowledge is dispersed widely, among many people in the contemporary world, as well as over many previous generations. They do not believe that the highest form of knowledge inheres in a few bright individuals of any age. For the *historic* exegetes, this is another way of saying that there is a traditional *way* of interpreting the Bible. This *way* is really the bounds of historic, orthodox Christianity. Princeton theologian and exegete, Charles Hodge, was one of the leading proponents of this view:

Protestants admit that there has been an uninterrupted tradi-

tion of truth from the protoevangelium to the close of the Apocalypse, so that there has been a stream of traditionary teaching flowing through the Christian church from the day of Pentecost to the present time. This tradition is so far a rule of faith that nothing contrary to it can be true. Christians do not stand isolated, each holding his own creed. They constitute one body, having one common creed. Rejecting that creed, or any of its parts, is the rejection of the fellowship of Christians, incompatible with the communion of saints, or membership in the body of Christ. In other words, Protestants admit that there is a common faith of the Church, which no man is at liberty to reject and be a Christian.¹⁸

Hodge succinctly expresses the Protestant view that biblical tradition affirmed by the Church catholic is an inviolable rule of faith. We are not free to abandon it, even in our biblical exegesis.

Exegesis within this Christian tradition is desirable, even if it sometimes errs. While, for example, many of the Patristic exegetes may have relied a little too heavily on a mystical and, therefore, fanciful exegesis, those who remained within the fold of the orthodox faith were practicing a legitimate *Christian* exegesis, no matter how erroneous their specific conclusions may have been. Likewise, while exegetes during the time of the Protestant Reformation may have relied a little too heavily on the immediate historical context of specific Biblical passages (not taking into account, for example the entire range of the Bible), they stayed within the confines of orthodox Christianity, and thus their exegesis was legitimate *Christian* exegesis. This traditional *way* of interpreting the Bible holds that the ancient ecumenical orthodoxy is an *implicit* deduction from the Bible's *explicit* teaching. In the language of the Presbyterians' Westminster Confession of Faith, it is "good and necessary consequence." If, therefore, ancient catholic orthodoxy is what the Bible itself implicitly teaches, to

interpret the Bible contrary to that orthodoxy is to wrongly interpret the Bible.

Historical exegesis and innovative exegesis are, in fact, two distinct, definable paradigms, even visions. They constitute different approaches to the Bible and to its interpretation and, in many cases, lead to different, sometimes radically different, conclusions.

Author

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Notes

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