

Introduction

As we approach this particular Sola, I'd like to break the rules for these essays a bit (being a true, Han Solo-esque, John Wayne-ish, church planter...) In approaching this theme, this essay will be mixing up the order of subjects and engaging several aspects of them through an interweaving methodology. First, we'll look very briefly at the present day issues that arise when considering the emphases of Sola Scriptura. Second, we'll approach each emphasis by describing it and placing it within biblical-theological context in the Scriptures and exploring how this theme is expressed in Christ's incarnational and ascension ministry. Then, we'll re-address and seek to resolve each particular present day issue as we look through the spectacles of Scripture. Then, we'll get back on track with the assignment, and see a handful of areas for how this theme can look in the present-day life of the Church, and what might be lacking in this conversation.

Present day issues that need addressed regarding Sola Scriptura

Introduction of Sola Scriptura & its historic significance

Biblical theological considerations

Expression through the Incarnational & Ascension Ministry of Jesus

We all are aware that there is a crisis of meaning within contemporary culture. This crisis of meaning applies not only to the things that we know, but to how we even know the things that we know. We are facing an epistemological crisis that leaves many in our culture struggling with active cynicism toward, or passive neglect of the Scriptures. Further, even in traditions which emphasize the phraseology of "Sola Scriptura", tendencies may arise that resemble what Vanhoozer describes as "naïve biblicism" where the "Sola" is swapped for a "Solo" and people come to see not Scripture alone as the supreme norm, but Scripture is alone as the *sole* norm.¹ As a result of this epistemological crisis, many, including people within our churches, can begin to approach Scripture with one (or several) of these distorted lenses:

1. *The Han Solo/John Wayne Lens*: This is the rugged individualist hermeneutic. You might even see it smoking a hand-rolled cigarette and moseying alone from time to time determining its own rules and approach to faith and life. This is the lens through which one declares that the revelation of the Word is something attained through just "me and my Bible", no guide, no teacher, certainly no creeds, and no Church providing instruction, trajectory, and a tradition as guidance. This issue has been kneaded deeply into the American Evangelical consciousness through the perpetuating influence of eras such as the Second Great Awakening. In Nathan Hatch's work, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, he notes the spread of the church in the frontier lands West of the Appalachians: "By appealing to abstract principles such as the Bible alone and the ancient order of things, Christian churches were constructing roofs over their heads. But they lacked the ecclesiastical walls of liturgy, governance, theology, and instruction that are normative in a given church tradition."² Hatch shows that this movement was not a conservative response to the revolutionary cultural forces of the time, but rather a religious expression of those *very same* revolutionary forces: rejection of traditional authorities, right of people to rule themselves, and world clashing opinions. This John Wayne mentality was not isolated to a mere handful of sects, but by the 1840s had infiltrated throughout American Protestantism to the degree that the theme of "No creed but the Bible" had become the predominate dynamic of religion in America.³ And, I suggest that this view of the Scriptures remains a deeply entrenched issue within American Protestantism.
2. *The Ralphie Lens*: This is the secret hermeneutic. In the 1983 film, "A Christmas Story," 3rd grader, Ralph Parker, is an ideal typology for the contemporary American evangelical. Not only do his consumerist fantasies of a Red Rider BB Gun symbolize our own cultural obsession with stuff, but his desire for

¹ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), p. 145.

² Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 65.

³ Hatch, 1989, 81.

revelation and the power that comes with holding interpretive authority are also emblematic of the condition of many corners in the American Church, and the Church throughout the ages. Ralphie had drunk gallons of Ovaltine in order to send off an application and receive access to the “Little Orphan Annie Secret Circle.” Membership in this inner sanctum also included possession of a decoder ring whereby the Elect could have sole access to vital messages communicated in the Little Orphan Annie radio program, “Annie is depending on you, set your pins to B2...” As Ralphie decoded his first secret message in the refuge of his family bathroom, the tension reached crescendo strength as he held the power of interpretive authority between his own forefinger and thumb as letter after letter of the secret message was revealed, and he mused, “What was it? The fate of the planet may hang in the balance...”

“B-E—S-U-R-E—T-O—D-R-I-N-K—Y-O-U-R—O-V-A-L-T-I-N-E...?”

“A crummy commercial...?”

If the Solo/Wayne view emphasizes personal autonomy, the Ralphie view is the extreme opposite, emphasizing the need to belong to an elite class or possess special knowledge in order to possess the secrets of God’s Word.

3. *The Kryptonite Lens*: This is the powerless hermeneutic. When we view Scripture through this particular lens we’re able to behold great stories, beautiful pictures of love, justice, and humility, heroes and anti-heroes from whom we can learn to become better people; but, the primary example of the betterment of the self is Jesus of Nazareth—our primary moral example and the ultimate picture of self-giving in the face of inexorable and abusive human power. Through this lens, the Bible becomes a How-To manual for the best way in which to order our lives, without necessarily holding the actual revelation of God for our salvation, certainly not viewing the gospel itself as the “power of God for salvation to all who believe...” (Romans 1:16). If there is power in the Scriptures it comes through the feelings we experience while hearing it read, or the wisdom that provides guidance in life decisions, or even in the orthodox doctrine that can be systematized out of distilling the Bible’s essential truths. Either in a theologically un-orthodox or even a theologically “orthodox” approach to the Bible (I use quotation marks because I might argue that an “orthodox” approach to the Scriptures is one that views them more than just a source from which to mine for mere theological truth and discard the calling to and revelation of the source of *love*— God in Christ), it is possible to render it powerless in the life of the creature if it is not read, meditated on, sought, and applied in faith and love for the Revealer himself (1 Cor. 13:1-13). In this view, the Scriptures exist and are proclaimed for whatever purpose the human creature might project upon them. No matter what the reader might profess, the Scriptures are functionally seen as natural in their origin, the Scripture’s own assertions of supernatural origins are either neglected or nostalgia-ized away, and as such they are rendered spiritually powerless.
4. *The Osteen View*: This is the “best life now” hermeneutic. This lens makes use of all the others, and very closely resembles the Kryptonite Lens. But, a distinguishing feature of this view is not just that the human desire is projected upon the Scriptures, but that each human’s *subjective desire* is projected upon the Scriptures and they are seen as the source from which I can be assured of my personal happiness and material bounty. In the Osteen view, the Word of God functions like my AMC Theaters Awards program: it exists for me to experience constant rewards, discounts, and all that I am entitled to as a result of the status I have paid into.

With these modern day issues before us we turn to briefly explore the primary themes within Sola Scriptura, situating these within a biblical-theological framework, and applying these themes in an attempt to bring resolution to our present day issues described above.

First, what better way to study the theme of Scripture’s vital place in faith and life than to look at Scripture itself (and what better way for a preacher to have a solid topical handhold to provide himself a theological boost)?

To give us a solid starting point, I'd like us to have in our minds these paragraphs from Paul's letter to the house churches of the region surrounding Ephesus as we proceed through the key points of this theme. Ephesians 2:19-3:13:

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

^{3:1} For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. ¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

With regard to the vitality of the Scriptures for Christian faith and life, the Reformers stressed this constellation of emphases: the Word's Authority, the Word's clarity, the Word's sufficiency, and the Word's formative nature.

1. The Scriptures are *Authoritative*—that is, the Church and her teachers stand *under* the Word as Scripture is the sole authority that shapes all aspects of Christian faith and life. The Word is seen as the *norma normans*, functioning as supreme authority under which every other teaching gift, tradition, and practice is subsumed.

We do not stand *on* the Word as if the Bible by itself authenticates all of our personal subjective views. We do not stand *with* the Word as equals as if our traditions, hierarchies, and decrees have the same value and authority

We do not stand *for* the Word as if it has no meaning and authority in itself, seeing ourselves as those who construct meaning and authority as co-authors.

We do not stand *over* the Word as the source of its authority, as if the authority of the Word of God is imbued within us as individuals or even as the Church.

When we return to our Ephesians passage above, taking note of vv19-20 we read about the new edifice, the new building of Jews and Gentiles together formed “together into one dwelling place for God by the Spirit...” we read that they are “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” Then, in v5 we read, “this mystery that has been revealed was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has been made know to his holy apostles and

prophets by the Spirit.” What we see is the image of a building—God is creating something new, the church as his temple, built on the apostles and prophets. What he’s pointing out are these two New Testament offices: the 12 apostles and the prophets of the New Testament, those accompanying the apostles, teaching and preaching the gospel alongside them. Now, these two offices are the first course of a stone wall upon which God is building the remaining building of his church. Paul refers to these men as “holy”, not because they’re better than other, nor are they closer to God; but, they have been set apart, consecrated, by the Spirit of Christ for this special role. The offices have now ceased, but the Word they taught is what builds the Church as the Church continues teaching in line with the original tradition established by this first course of stone work in God’s master building. Paul’s point? The authority these men proclaimed with did not reside in the men nor in their office, but in the *teaching tradition* they proclaimed, even as their teaching remained in line with the person and work of Jesus, which itself is what Moses and all the prophets pointed to since the very beginning (Luke 24:27). This is why Paul goes on to write in his letter to the Thessalonian church, “stand firm and hold to the *traditions* that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter...” (2 Thess. 2:15). The *faithful message* that is in line with everything that came before is where the locus of authority lay. The locus of authority is not in a particular office, role, or person. Why not? Because there is only one particular cornerstone, one particular person, Jesus Christ: “with Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,” (v20). The cornerstone is the vital component of a building by which everything else is measured. Jesus Christ is the one by which everything and everyone else in the building finds its structure, balance, coordination. In echoing Isaiah 28:16, Paul emphasizes the dramatic work of God in bringing his prophecy about through Jesus: “Behold, I am the one who has laid a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation. Whoever believes will never be dismayed...” This Isaiah passage emphasizes the Lord washing away the lies and idolatry of Judah, and establishing a solid base for a new temple in the remaining cornerstone. And, in Christ’s incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension Paul sees Jesus Christ as the One who has accomplished all of this, and like Isaiah, Paul calls his readers to entrust themselves to his person and work. Jesus is the Cornerstone! This is something that Jesus himself declares as recorded in the Gospel of John where Jesus draws on the imagery of temple, applying this to himself: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” (Jn. 2:19). In this, he is referring to his own body, declaring *himself* to be God’s Temple. In John 5, Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and challenges their obsession with the Scriptures—their seeking of orthodoxy and failure to see what it all authoritatively pointed to: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life,” (Jn. 5:39-40). Even the Pharisees, the experts in the Bible, missed what the Bible was all about—Jesus as the cornerstone, finding life in Jesus alone, personally. It is this faithful declaration of the gospel tradition established by Christ’s apostolic servants that is the locus of authority of the Scriptures.

This view of the Scripture’s authority is also one which the earliest Church Fathers held. In his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus emphasized the function of the Scriptures as the very ground of our faith, all other church authority is derivative: “We have learned the plan of our salvation from no one else other than those through whom the gospel has come down to us. For they did at one time proclaim the gospel in public. And, at a later period, by the will of God, they handed the gospel down to us in the Scriptures to be the ‘ground and pillar of our faith.’” In exploring the views of the Patristics in their contributions to the formation of the Nicene Creed, TF Torrance comments on Irenaeus, “It was ultimately in the Gospels themselves that Irenaeus located the vivifying deposit committed to the Church, and handed on by the Apostles.”⁴ He continues by summarizing the Patristic emphasis on the risen and ascended Christ which the gospel proclaims as the source and goal of all and any authority that the Church and her teachers may possess, and at the same time the Church and her apostolic foundation as the

⁴ TF Torrance. *The Trinitarian Faith*. (London: T&T Clark, 1988), p257.

“nucleus” through which the authority of Christ is extended into the world by the Spirit’s continuing mission through Christ’s Church:

“...through the resurrection and the sending of his Spirit he fulfilled and unfolded the content of his self-revelation as Saviour and Lord within the apostolic nucleus of the Church. He allowed it to take authoritative shape in the apostolic mind and embody itself in the apostolic mission, in such a constitutive way that the identity and continuity of the Church and its teaching in history became inseparably bound up with it.”⁵

“...from that time onward people may have access to the deposit of faith only in the form which, under the creative and renewing impact of the risen Lord and his Spirit, it has assumed once for all in the apostolic foundation and tradition, i.e., through the apostolic interpretation of the Gospel mediated to us in the Scriptures of the New Testament and through baptismal incorporation into Christ in the midst of his Church...”⁶

The authority of the Scriptures means that the faithful teaching of the Bible, regulated by the tradition of Christ’s authorized apostles, is the only rule for Christian faith and life, and all else is measured by it. This directly confronts the Han Solo/John Wayne approach to the Scriptures. The irony of this view is that, while the person asserts that they are independent of any authority, there ultimately is indeed an authority—that of the *self*. And, this view blinds one to another, more subtle, influence—that of the traditions of the world.

All of us inhabit some *tradition*, all of us are shaped by something to which we submit by faith—whether we are a Christian or a secular person, we all are submitting ourselves to some tradition, *by faith* in that tradition, that provides for us a particular ‘plausibility structure’ that allows us to interpret and live within our spatio-temporal reality. This intuition-forming process is one of the functions of the Word as authoritative. Lesslie Newbigin explains the Christian intuition-forming process of this authorized tradition in this way:

“This ‘understanding’ is more than a matter of logical argument. It is much more a kind of intuition. Most of us can, perhaps, remember early struggles with school mathematics. There is a time, sometimes a long time, when one simply cannot see what the point is. The teacher’s words are clear and simple, but one cannot see the point. And then suddenly the penny drops. One sees that there is something true and beautiful and satisfying. Afterward it is impossible to see how we could not have seen it before. The logical steps the teacher took in explaining it are now quite clear, and we wonder why they were not clear before. It is a little like trying to learn how to ride a bicycle. You can be told all about the way the balance is kept by turning the front wheel this way or that, but you still fall off. But, then, suddenly, you know how to do it, and after that you soon reach the point where the actions needed to keep your balance are no longer a matter of deliberate decision. You have so internalized them that you no longer attend to them but think only about where you are going. While you are still learning and falling off, you have to accept in faith the belief that people *can* ride a two-wheeled machine without falling off. You have to submit yourself to the

⁵ Torrance, 1988, p258.

⁶ Torrance, 1988, p259.

tradition of bicycle riding until the point comes when you have internalized the tradition and it has become part of your own self...”⁷

2. The Scriptures are *Clear*. In our passage from Ephesians Paul writes in vv3-4: “how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ...” He makes use of the word “mystery” (**musthrian**), which we might quickly equate to “unknowable secret”. But, Paul is making use of this word and the accompanying interpretive phrases in a way that more accurately reflects the use of “mystery” in the book of Daniel (2:18-19, 28-29, 37, 45) where the Scripture communicates the notion of “mystery” as something that was formally hidden and *now has been fully revealed*. This revelation of what had been revealed is the reason why Paul also goes on to include phrases such as: “made known by *revelation*,” (v3), “*revealed to holy Apostles and Prophets*,” (v5), “*this mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs...*” (v6), “*...bring to light for everyone...*” (v9). The deposit of faith revealed to the Apostles and Prophets was given so that this great mystery of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Covenant people of God by virtue of his mercy in Christ could be revealed to *everyone* plainly, through the authoritative Scriptural tradition.

In Patristic thought, the way in which one experiences the full revelation of this mystery is through the sacrament of baptism, by which one is brought in as a member of Christ’s new covenant community:

“Athanasius claimed that it is in baptism that the *‘fullness of the mystery (to plhrwma tou musthriou)* is lodged, for it is given in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (*Contra Arius*). That helps to explain why the Creed spoke only of ‘one baptism’, and not also of ‘one eucharist’, as might have been expected. In its correlation with the Holy Trinity baptism was regarded as the great seal, or the all-embracing sacrament bound up with one Body, one Spirit, one Lord, one Faith, and one God and Father, while eucharist was regarded as celebrated only within the Church’s participation in the great mystery of baptism and as properly included within it.”⁸

The assertion of Scripture’s clarity means that the Ralphie, de-coder ring, approach to the Scriptures also is deficient. The Bible is not a secret message requiring a scholarly degree, an interpreting priest or pastor, or membership in an elite inner circle in order to grasp the basic message of salvation. Though to eschew the help and guidance of the pastoral office in the process of interpretation of these mysteries could be akin to rejecting the tradition of the authoritative teaching tradition of the Apostles and Prophets. This is the case because of the inseparable connection between the Church and its teaching in history and the authorized apostolic mission. So, because of the clarity of the Scriptures, while authorized interpreters are not *required* they still remain *needed* in order to provide canonical, Redemptive-historical, and ecclesiological context for Spirit-directed interpretation and application appropriately regulated by the Scripture itself.

As summarized in the Second Helvetic Confession:

“Inward illumination does not eliminate external preaching. For he that illuminates inwardly by giving men the Holy Spirit, the same one, by way of commandment, said unto his disciples, ‘God into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation,’ (Mark 16:15)...And Paul, after a beautiful development of his thought, in Romans 10:17 at length comes to the conclusion,

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), p43.

⁸ Torrance, 1988, 290.

“So faith comes from hearing and hearing from the Word of God by the preaching of Christ.”

Further, the Scriptures functioning as clarifying “spectacles” allow God’s people to see the work of God over history with greater clarity. And, as spectacles, this new vision is not something that we can construct or that we come equipped with, but the spectacles themselves are a gift of God’s grace received and applied through the gift of faith— with both the grace of the spectacles and the faith in order to use them appropriately being gifts of the Spirit. This also is the reason why a mere reading of the words of the Bible is not in itself effectual for salvation *ex operate operato*, as if the Scriptures are a tome of magical incantations. As the Psalmist writes: “The unfolding of your words give light; it imparts understanding to the simple,” (Ps 119:130). There is indeed an unfolding process by the interpreter in the power of the gift of the Spirit of the risen Christ of God’s own words for the purpose of beholding the glory of God in Christ and so bring the renewing power of Christ into the life of the reader through the exercise of the gift of faith.

3. The Scriptures are *Sufficient*. That is, the Scriptures accomplish what God intends. In vv7-8 our Ephesians passage Paul continues to write: “Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...” What is it that Paul is writing?—that the “unsearchable riches of Christ” has a *location*. That, while Christ has ascended to his Father physically, the very preaching of the gospel in the power of the descended Spirit is the revelation and declaration of the very person of Jesus Christ for the sinner. Nothing further is required for the vivifying work of the Spirit of Christ to come into the life and heart of the elect of God. This is the very reason why Jesus declares in John 10:27-30, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” The voice of Jesus goes out through the faithful Spirit-filled preaching of Jesus and is effectual for those whom God knows as his own. And, this is the very work of Christ through his Spirit-mediated body, the Church:

“What Christ has done for us in his saving work he has embodied in his own Person as Saviour and continues to be as saving act of God on our behalf and as Word of salvation to us. As the Word of God, by whom all things visible and invisible were created, himself become flesh for our sake, Christ is also the Word who in being proclaimed to us remains the mighty saving act of God. Thus the message of Christ must be regarded as more than a message of who he was and what he has done for us, for it is so integrated with him that it is itself the saving Word and power of God constantly at work among his people precisely as Word, and effectively operative in the faith of the Church, anchoring it and giving it substance in the Person of Christ as Saviour and Lord.”⁹

This saving act of God in the person of Jesus Christ *remains* the saving act of God as the message of the very person of Christ, not merely what he has done, is proclaimed in the Church.

This assertion of the Word’s sufficiency deconstructs another evangelical tendency to approach the Scriptures through the Kryptonite approach. The Word of God has *power*, “it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe, first for the Jew then for the Gentile...” (Rom 1:16). The Spirit-given power of the preached Word of God is also the very reason why we see Peter’s listeners “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37) on the day of Pentecost, why Peter himself experienced repentance and faith, and Spirit-led

⁹ Torrance, 1988, 260.

transformation *within the course of his own preaching* as he brought the gospel to the Gentile Cornelius and his household. As the proclaimers of this message of power, we also are included as those who are transformed as we receive-and-preach the Word of God by faith that our ascended Lord's presence is being mediated through our obedience to his Spirit's direction through our very lives and voices. This profound mystery is at the heart of the Second Helvetic Confession's statement that:

“The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.”

This “sufficiency” of the Scriptures is a simple summary of the great mystery proclaimed through Isaiah, “so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed for the thing which I sent it,” (Isaiah 55:11).

4. The Scriptures are *Formative*.
Section under Construction...

To be further elucidated...

- What does this sola look like in concrete ways in the life of the church? (What specific practices and spirituality?)
 - Inhabiting an alternative Plausibility Structure, critique existing plausibility structure—seeking to understand contemporary thought, culture, our own feelings, desires, and circumstances in light of the biblical narrative, Newbiggin, McIntyre
 - Non-anxious differentiated presence, faithful presence, get off bus of this culture's vision of life, Hunter
 - Hermeneutical task is vital, epistemological question
 - “abiding” task is vital – dwelling in the story, rehearsing the story—urs Balthasar, teatro del mundo, affections being shaped by the Word—“liturgies” JK Smith
 - Communities seeking to inhabit together, living the alternative plausibility structure—communal participation in grace, communal partnership in mission

- What is lacking in this conversation, what doesn't the sola address that it needs to address?
 - Theo Drama
 - Faithful Improv
 - Power of the Spirit