

A Critique of the Evangelical Doctrine of Sola Scriptura

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In the 1980s and early 1990s, a controversy erupted among dispensationalists which came to be referred to as the Lordship Salvation controversy. On one side of the debate were men such as Zane Hodges¹ and Charles Ryrie² who taught a reductionistic doctrine of *solafide* which absolutized the word “alone” in the phrase “justification by faith alone” and removed it from its overall theological context. Faith was reduced to little more than assent to the truthfulness of certain biblical propositions. Repentance, sanctification, submission to Christ’s Lordship, love, and perseverance were all said to be unnecessary for salvation. Advocates of this position claimed that it was the classical Reformation position taught by Martin Luther and John Calvin. On the other side of the debate was John MacArthur who argued that these men were clearly abandoning the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone.³ In addition to the books written by the primary dispensationalist participants, numerous Reformed theologians wrote books and articles criticizing this alteration of the doctrine of *solafide*.⁴ A heated theological controversy began which continues in some circles even to this day.

Ironically, a similar drastic alteration of the classical Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura* has occurred over the last 150 years, yet this has caused hardly a stir among the theological heirs of the Reformation, who have usually been quick to notice any threatening move against the Reformed doctrine of justification. So much time and effort has been spent guarding the doctrine of *sola fide* against

¹ Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1989).

² Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989).

³ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); *Faith Works*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1993).

⁴ E.g., Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Lord of the Saved*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Co. 1992); Michael S. Horton, ed., *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).

any perversion or change that many do not seem to have noticed that the classical and foundational Reformed doctrine of *sola scriptura* has been so altered that is virtually unrecognizable. In its place Evangelicals have substituted an entirely different doctrine. Douglas Jones has coined the term *solo scriptura* to refer to this aberrant Evangelical version of *sola scriptura*.⁵

Modern Evangelicalism has done the same thing to *sola scriptura* that Hodges and Ryrie did to *solafide*. But unfortunately so little attention is paid to the doctrine of *sola scriptura* today that even among trained theologians there is confusion and ambiguity when the topic is raised. Contradictory and insufficient definitions of *sola scriptura* are commonplace not only among broadly Evangelical authors but among Reformed authors as well. In this chapter we shall examine this aberrant modern Evangelical concept of *solo scriptura* and explain why it is imperative that the Evangelical church recognize it to be as dangerous as the distorted concepts of *solafide* that are prevalent in the Church today.

EVANGELICAL INDIVIDUALISM

The modern Evangelical version of *solo scriptura* is nothing more than a new version of Tradition 0. Instead of being defined as the sole *infallible* authority, the Bible is said to be the “sole basis of authority”⁶ Tradition is not allowed in any sense; the ecumenical creeds are virtually dismissed; and the Church is denied any real authority. On the surface it would seem that this modern Evangelical doctrine would have nothing in *common* with the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox doctrines of authority. But despite the very real differences, the modern Evangelical position shares one major flaw with both the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox positions. Each results in autonomy. Each results in final authority being placed somewhere other than God and His Word. Unlike the Roman Catholic position and the Eastern Orthodox position, however, which invariably result in the autonomy of the Church, the modern Evangelical position inevitably results in the autonomy of the individual believer.

We have already seen that there is a major difference between the concept of Scripture and tradition taught by the classical Reformers and the concept taught by the Anabaptists and their heirs. The Anabaptist concept, here referred to as Tradition 0, attempted to deny the authority of tradition in any real sense. The Scriptures were considered not only the sole final and infallible authority, but the only authority whatsoever. The Enlightenment added the philosophical framework in which to comprehend this individualism. The individual reason was elevated to the position of final authority. Appeals to antiquity and tradition of any

⁵ Douglas Jones, *Putting the Reformation “Solas” in Perspective*, audio tapes, (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1997).

⁶ Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 22.

kind were ridiculed. In the early years of the United States, democratic populism swept the people along in its fervor.⁷ The result is a modern American Evangelicalism which has redefined *sola scriptura* in terms of secular Enlightenment rationalism and rugged democratic individualism.

Perhaps the best way to explain the fundamental problem with the modern Evangelical version of solo *scriptura* would be through the use of an illustration to which many believers may be able to relate. Almost every Christian who has wrestled with theological questions has encountered the problem of competing interpretations of Scripture. If one asks a dispensationalist pastor, for example, why he teaches premillennialism, the answer will be, "Because the Bible teaches premillennialism." If one asks the conservative Presbyterian pastor across the street why he teaches amillennialism (or postmillennialism), the answer will likely be, "Because that is what the Bible teaches." Each man will claim that the other is in error, but by what ultimate authority do they typically make such a judgment? Each man will claim that he bases his judgment on the authority of the Bible, but since each man's interpretation is mutually exclusive of the other's, both interpretations cannot be correct. How then do we discern which interpretation is correct?

The typical modern Evangelical solution to this problem is to tell the inquirer to examine the arguments on both sides and decide which of them is closest to the teaching of Scripture. He is told that this is what *sola scriptura* means — to individually evaluate all doctrines according to the only authority, the Scripture. Yet in reality, all that occurs is that one Christian measures the scriptural interpretations of other Christians against the standard of his own scriptural interpretation. Rather than placing the final authority in Scripture as it intends to do, this concept of Scripture places the final authority in the reason and judgment of each individual believer. The result is the relativism, subjectivism, and theological chaos that we see in modern Evangelicalism today.

A fundamental and self-evident truth that seems to be unconsciously overlooked by proponents of the modern Evangelical version of solo *scriptura* is that no one is infallible in his interpretation of Scripture. Each of us comes to the Scripture with different presuppositions, blind spots, ignorance of important facts, and, most importantly, sinfulness. Because of this we each read things into Scripture that are not there and miss things in Scripture that are there. Unfortunately, a large number of modern Evangelicals have followed in the footsteps of Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), founder of the Disciples of Christ, who naively believed he could come to Scripture with absolutely no preconceived notions or biases. We have already mentioned Campbell's naive statement,

⁷ Cf. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). See also Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 44-48.

I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me, and I am as much on my guard against reading them today, 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.⁸

The same ideas were expressed by Lewis Sperry Chafer, the extremely influential founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary. Chafer believed that his lack of any theological training gave him the ability to approach scriptural interpretation without bias. He said, “the very fact that I did not study a prescribed course in theology made it possible for me to approach the subject with an unprejudiced mind and to be concerned only with what the Bible actually teaches.”⁹ This, however, is simply impossible. Unless one can escape the effects of sin, ignorance, and all previous learning, one cannot read the Scriptures without some bias and blind spots. This is a given of the post-Fall human condition.

This naive belief in the ability to escape one’s own noetic and spiritual limitations led Campbell and his modern Evangelical heirs to discount any use of secondary authorities. The Church, the creeds, and the teachings of the early fathers were all considered quaint at best. The discarding of the creeds is a common feature of the modern Evangelical notion of solo *scriptura*. It is so pervasive that one may find it even in the writings of prominent Reformed theologians. For example, in a recently published and well-received Reformed systematic theology text, Robert Reymond laments the fact that most Reformed Christians adhere to the Trinitarian orthodoxy expressed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.¹⁰ He openly calls for an abandonment of the Nicene Trinitarian concept in favor of a different Trinitarian concept. One cannot help but wonder how this is any different than the Unitarians rejection of creedal orthodoxy. They call for the rejection of one aspect of Nicene Trinitarianism while Reymond calls for the rejection of another. Why is one considered heretical and the other published by a major Evangelical publishing house?

An important point that must be kept in mind is observed by the great nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Samuel Miller. He noted that the most zealous opponents of creeds “have been those who held corrupt opinions?”¹¹ This is still the case today. The one common feature found in many published defenses of heretical doctrines aimed at Evangelical readers is the staunch advocacy of the

⁸ Hatch, op. cit., 179.

⁹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 8:5-6.

¹⁰ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), xxi.

¹¹ Samuel Miller, *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions*, (Greenville, SC: A Press, 1991) 16.

modern Evangelical notion of solo *scriptura* with its concomitant rejection of the subordinate authority of the ecumenical creeds. The first goal of these authors is to convince the reader that *sola scriptura* means solo *scriptura*. In other words, their first goal is to convince readers that there are no binding doctrinal boundaries within Christianity.

In his defense of annihilationism, for example, Edward Fudge states that Scripture “is the only unquestionable or binding source of doctrine on this or any subject?”¹² He adds that the individual should weigh the scriptural interpretations of other uninspired and fallible Christians against Scripture.¹³ He does not explain how the Christian is to escape his own uninspired fallibility. The doctrinal boundaries of Christian orthodoxy are cast aside as being historically conditioned and relative.¹⁴ Of course, Fudge fails to note that his interpretation is as historically conditioned and relative as any that he criticizes.¹⁵

Another heresy that has been widely promoted with the assistance of the modern Evangelical version of solo *scriptura* is hyper-preterism or pantelism.¹⁶ While there are numerous internal squabbles over details, in general advocates of this doctrine insist that Jesus Christ returned in AD. 70 at the destruction of Jerusalem and that at that time sin and death were destroyed, the Adamic curse was lifted, Satan was cast into the lake of fire, the rapture and general resurrection occurred, the final judgment occurred, mourning and crying and pain were done away with, and the eternal state began. The proponents of pantelism are even more vocal in their rejection of orthodox Christian doctrinal boundaries than Fudge. Ed Stevens, for example, writes,

Even if the creeds were to clearly and definitively stand against the preterist view (which they don't), it would not be an over-whelming problem since *they have no real authority anyway*. They are no more authoritative than our best opinions today, but they are valued because of their antiquity.¹⁷

This is a hallmark of the doctrine of solo *scriptura*, and it is a position that the classical Reformers adamantly rejected. Stevens continues elsewhere,

¹² Edward William Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, Rev. ed. (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1994), 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ For a good scriptural critique of annihilationism, see Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 1995).

¹⁶ For an introduction and scriptural critique of this new heresy, see C. Jonathin Seraiah, *The End of All Things*, (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Ed Stevens, “Creeds and Preterist Orthodoxy,” Unpublished Paper. Emphasis mine.

We must not take the creeds any more seriously than we do the writings and opinions of men like Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, the Westminster Assembly, Campbell, Rushdoony, or C.S. Lewis.¹⁸

Here we see the clear rejection of scripturally based structures of authority. The authority of those who rule in the Church is rejected by placing the decisions of an ecumenical council of ministers on the same level as the words of any individual. This is certainly the democratic way of doing things, and it is as American as apple pie, but it is not Christian. If what Mr. Stevens writes is true, then Christians should not take the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity any more seriously than we take some idiosyncratic doctrine of Alexander Campbell or C.S. Lewis. If this doctrine of solo *scriptura* and all that it entails is true, then the Church has no more right or authority to declare Arianism a heresy than Cornelius Van Til would have to authoritatively declare classical apologetics a heresy. Orthodoxy and heresy would necessarily be an individualistic and subjective determination.

Another pantelist, John Noe, claims that this rejection of the authority of the ecumenical creeds “is what the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is all about.”¹⁹ As we have demonstrated, this is manifestly untrue of the classical Reformed doctrine of *sola scriptura*. The doctrine of Scripture being espoused by these men is a doctrine of Scripture that is based upon anabaptistic individualism, Enlightenment rationalism, and democratic populism. It is a doctrine of Scripture divorced from its Christian context. It is no different than the doctrine of Scripture and tradition advocated by the Jehovah’s Witnesses in numerous publications such as *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* in which individuals are urged to reject the ecumenical Christian creeds in favor of a new hermeneutical context.²⁰ Yet the false idea that this doctrine is the Reformation doctrine pervades the thinking of the modern American Evangelical church. Unfortunately the widespread ignorance of the true Reformation doctrine makes it that much easier for purveyors of false doctrine to sway those who have been either unable or unwilling to check the historical facts.

CRITIQUE

The modern Evangelical doctrine of Scripture, or solo *scriptura*, is untenable for a number of reasons.²¹ Aside from the fact that it is a novel position based upon rationalistic secular philosophy, and aside from the fact that it is dishonestly presented as if it were the Reformation position, it is also unbiblical, illogical, and

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ John Noe, *Beyond the End Times*, (Bradford, PA: Preterist Resources, 1999), 213.

²⁰ No author, (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2000).

²¹ In one sense this section has already been covered by virtually every published Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox critique of what they term *sola scriptura*. These published critiques tend to focus only upon Tradition 0 or solo *scriptura*.

unworkable. At this point we must examine carefully some of the many reasons why *solo scriptura* fails.

SCRIPTURAL PROBLEMS

Scripture itself indicates that the Scriptures are the possession of the Church and that the interpretation of the Scripture belongs to the Church as a whole, as a community. In particular it has been entrusted to specially gifted men. This has already been examined in some detail in the previous discussion of the Bereans and the Jerusalem Council. The Apostles did not tell every individual believer to take their Bibles and decide by themselves and for themselves whether the Judaizers were correct. On the contrary, they gathered in a council as a body and discerned the truth of the matter. Their decision then was given to the various churches. The fundamental point is that Christ established His Church with a structure of authority that is to be obeyed (Heb. 13:7). Even in the first years of the Church, there were those who were specially appointed to the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:2-4). In his letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul indicates that a special teaching ministry was to continue after his death (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 8:5-9). The modern Evangelical doctrine of Scripture essentially destroys the real authority of ministers of the Word and the Church as a whole.

Adherents of the Evangelical position also ignore the positive scriptural references to tradition. The Gospel was preached for at least 15-20 years prior to the writing of the first book of the New Testament, and that preached gospel was authoritative and binding. This apostolic tradition was the faith of the churches who received the first books of the New Testament, and it was the context within which these books and the books of the Old Testament were to be interpreted. This is the tradition to which the churches were commanded to adhere (e.g., 2 Thess. 3:6). We have already discussed the manner in which this apostolic *kerygma* was taught to every catechumen and recited from memory at baptism. It is important for our purposes here simply to note that this hermeneutical context of Scripture was not abrogated once Scripture was completed. The Scriptures were written to *already existing* churches, and this means that these churches had the Gospel before they had the completed Scriptures.

HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEMS

An extremely significant problem with *solo scriptura* is the subjectivity into which it casts all hermeneutical endeavors. Ultimately the interpretation of Scripture becomes individualistic with no possibility for the resolution of differences. This occurs because adherents of *solo scriptura* rip the Scripture out of its ecclesiastical and traditional hermeneutical context, leaving it in a relativistic vacuum. The problem is that there are differing interpretations of Scripture, and

Christians are told that these can be resolved by a simple appeal to Scripture. But is it possible to resolve the problem of differing interpretations of Scripture by an appeal to another interpretation of Scripture? The problem that adherents of solo *scriptura* haven't noticed is that any appeal to Scripture is an appeal to *an interpretation* of Scripture. The only question is: *whose* interpretation? When we are faced with conflicting interpretations of Scripture, we cannot set a Bible on a table and ask it to resolve our difference of opinion as if it were a Ouija board. In order for Scripture to serve as an authority at all, it must be read, exegeted, and interpreted by somebody. In order for the Holy Spirit to speak through Scripture, some human agency must be involved, even if that human agent is simply one individual reading the text of Scripture.

The adherents of solo *scriptura* dismiss all of this claiming that the reason and conscience of the individual believer is the supreme interpreter. Yet this results in nothing more than hermeneutical solipsism. It renders the universal and objective truth of Scripture virtually useless because instead of the Church proclaiming with one voice to the world what the Scripture teaches, every individual interprets Scripture as seems right in his own eyes. The unbelieving world is left hearing a cacophony of conflicting voices rather than the Word of the living God.

The doctrine of solo *scriptura*, despite its claims to uniquely preserve the authority of the Word of God, destroys that authority by making the meaning of Scripture dependent upon the judgment of each individual. Rather than the Word of God being the one final court of appeal, the court of appeal becomes the multiplied minds of each believer. One is persuaded that Calvinism is more biblical. The other is persuaded that dispensationalism is more biblical. And by what standard does each decide? The standard is each individual's opinion of what is biblical. The standard is necessarily individualistic, and therefore the standard is necessarily relativistic.

HISTORICAL PROBLEMS

It should go without saying that solo *scriptura* was not the doctrine of the early Church or of the medieval Church. However, most proponents of solo *scriptura* would not be bothered in the least by this fact because they are not concerned to maintain any continuity with the teaching of the early Church. On the other hand, some are concerned to claim that their teaching is the doctrine of the classical Reformers. As we have demonstrated already, this is simply false. The classical Reformers did not adhere to Tradition 0 which is essentially all that solo *scriptura* is. Any claim by adherents of solo *scriptura* to be carrying on the teaching of the Reformers is incorrect. It is said either out of ignorance or deceit. The roots of solo *scriptura* lay not in the Apostles, not in the early Church, and not in the Reformers, but instead in the individualism of the Radical Reformation, the rationalism of the Enlightenment, and the democratic populism of early America.

The doctrine of solo *scriptura* also faces serious problems when we consider what rule of faith the Church used in the years between Christ's death and the widespread availability of the entire Scripture. If solo *scriptura* is true, then much of the Church was left without any standard of truth for centuries. In the early centuries of the Church it was not possible to go to a local Christian bookstore and buy a copy of the Bible. Manuscripts of the Bible had to be hand-copied and were therefore not found in every believer's home. The letters of the New Testament were written over a period of decades. Some churches had some portions, while other churches had others. Only gradually was the New Testament as we know it gathered and distributed as a whole.²² Additionally, large segments of the Church were illiterate for centuries. If the lone individual Christian is to evaluate everything by himself and for himself according to his Bible, as solo *scriptura* maintains, how would it have worked in the first centuries of the Church for those with no access to a Bible? How would it work for those who could not read a Bible even if they had access to one? Again, the doctrine of solo *scriptura* is observed to be something tailor made by and for modern literate Christians. For many Christians throughout much of the Church's history, it wouldn't even have been possible. The doctrine of solo *scriptura* requires an anachronistic reading of modern conditions back into periods of history when those conditions did not exist.

THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Solo *scriptura* is beset with numerous theological problems, the most significant being the problem of the canon. The canon is the list of books which are inspired by God. According to adherents of solo *scriptura*, the Bible is the only authority because its books are inspired, but the Bible nowhere includes an inspired list of inspired books. What this means is that solo *scriptura* can assert that Scripture is the only authority, but it cannot define with any absolute certainty what Scripture is. When adherents do attempt to define and defend a particular canon, they cannot do so using the Bible as their only authority. In order for solo *scriptura* to be true, the Bible would have to include not only all of the inspired books of the Bible, but also an inspired table of contents telling us which books were really inspired. However, even this would not be enough, for we would not know that the table of contents was inspired apart from an extra-scriptural divine intervention or another inspired document telling us that the original list was inspired. Of course then we would just move the problem back another step, and so on into infinity.

Most proponents of solo *scriptura* simply ignore the problem of the canon as if the Bibles they hold in their hands dropped whole and complete from heaven.

²² For an outstanding study on the canonization of the New Testament, see Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

Yet this is not what happened in actual history. The individual books of Scripture were written over a period of one thousand years. Even the New Testament books were written over a period of decades and only gradually found their way to all of the churches. Numerous apocryphal gospels and epistles were written, some of which were considered authoritative in certain churches. It took time for the New Testament canon of twenty-seven books that we have today to be universally recognized. The doctrine of solo *scriptura* presupposes a complete and closed canon that it cannot account for or defend on its own principles. This fundamental self-contradiction is one of its most obvious flaws.

The doctrine of solo *scriptura* also reduces the essential doctrines of the Christian faith to no more than opinion by denying any real authority to the ecumenical creeds of the Church. We must note that if the ecumenical creeds are no more authoritative than the opinions of any individual Christian, as adherents of solo *scriptura* must say if they are to remain consistent, then the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity and the Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ are no more authoritative than the doctrinal ideas of any opinionated Christian. The doctrine of the Trinity and deity of Christ become as open to debate as the doctrine of exclusive psalmody in worship.

It is extremely important to understand the importance of this point. If the adherents of solo *scriptura* are correct, then there are no real objective doctrinal boundaries within Christianity. Each individual Christian is responsible to search the Scripture (even though he can't be told with any certainty what books constitute Scripture) and judge for himself and by himself what is and is not scriptural doctrine. In other words, each individual is responsible for establishing his or her own doctrinal boundaries — his or her own creed.

If the ecumenical creeds have no real authority, then it cannot be of any major consequence if a person decides to reject some or all of the doctrines of these creeds — including the Trinity and the deity of Christ. If the individual judges the Trinity to be an unbiblical doctrine, then for him it is false. No other authority exists to correct him outside of his own interpretation of Scripture. This is precisely why solo *scriptura* inevitably results in radical relativism and subjectivity. Each man decides for himself what the essential doctrines of Christianity are, each man creates his own creed from scratch, and concepts such as orthodoxy and heresy become completely obsolete. The concept of Christianity itself becomes obsolete because it no longer has any meaningful objective definition. Since solo *scriptura* has no means by which Scripture's propositional doctrinal content may be authoritatively defined (such definition necessarily entails the unacceptable creation of an authoritative ecumenical creed), its propositional content can only be subjectively defined by each individual. One individual may consider the Trinity essential, another may consider it a pagan idea imported into Christianity. Without an authoritatively defined statement of Christianity's propositional doctrinal content, neither individual can definitively and finally be declared wrong. Solo *scriptura* destroys

this possibility, and thereby destroys the possibility of Christianity being a meaningful concept. Instead, by reducing Christianity to relativism and subjectivity, it reduces Christianity to irrationalism and ultimately nonsense.

PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

The problems listed above all reveal practical problems inherent in the doctrine of solo *scriptura*. It is simply unworkable in either theory or in practice. We have already discussed the practical hermeneutical problems that arise from solo *scriptura*. At this point we must discuss how solo *scriptura* necessarily leads to schism and factionalism, and how it undermines real ecclesiastical authority.

The Christian Church today is split into literally tens of thousands of denominations with hundreds of new divisions arising daily. Much of the responsibility for this divisiveness rests with the doctrine of solo *scriptura*. When each individual's conscience becomes the final authority for that individual, differences of opinion will occur. When men feel strongly enough about their individual interpretations, they separate from those they believe to be in error. In the world today, we have millions of believers and churches convinced of thousands of mutually contradictory doctrines, and all of them claim to base their beliefs on the authority of Scripture alone.

Not only has solo *scriptura* contributed heavily to this division and sectarianism, it can offer no possible solution. Solo *scriptura* is the ecclesiastical equivalent of a nation with a constitution but no court of law to interpret that constitution. Both can lead to chaos. At best solo *scriptura* can offer an abstract doctrinal statement to the effect that "Scripture" is the sole authority. But using Scripture alone, it cannot tell us what "Scripture" is or what it means. It simply cannot resolve differences of interpretation, and the result is more and more division and schism. The resolution of theological differences requires the possibility of authoritatively defining the propositional doctrinal content of Christianity, and it requires the possibility of an authoritative ecclesiastical "Supreme Court?" Since neither of these possibilities are allowed within the framework of solo *scriptura*, there can be no possibility of resolution.

Solo *scriptura* also undermines the legitimate ecclesiastical authority established by Christ. It negates the duty to submit to those who rule over you, because it removes the possibility of an authoritative teaching office in the Church. To place any kind of real hermeneutical authority in an elder or teacher undermines the doctrine of solo *scriptura*. Those adherents of solo *scriptura* who do have pastors and teachers to whom they look for leadership do so under the stipulation that the individual is to evaluate the leader's teaching by Scripture first. What this means in practice is that the individual is to measure his teacher's interpretation of Scripture against his own interpretation of Scripture. The playing field is leveled when neither the ecumenical creeds nor the Church has any more

authority than the individual believer, but Christ did not establish a level playing field. He did not establish a democracy. He established a Church in which men and women are given different gifts, some of which involve a special gift of teaching and leading. These elders have responsibility for the flock and a certain authority over it. Scripture would not call us to submit to those who had no real authority over us (Heb. 13:17; Acts 20:28).

AUTONOMY

Ultimately, the fundamental problem with solo *scriptura* is the same problem that exists within the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox concepts of Scripture and tradition. All of these concepts result in autonomy. All result in final authority being placed somewhere other than God and His Word. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox doctrines result in the autonomy of the Church. Solo *scriptura* results in the autonomy of the individual believer who becomes a law unto himself. Scripture is interpreted according to the conscience and reason of the individual. Everything is evaluated according to the final standard of the individual's opinion of what is and is not scriptural. The individual, not Scripture, is the real final authority according to solo *scriptura*. This is rebellious autonomy, and it is a usurpation of the prerogatives of God.

Adherents of solo *scriptura* have not understood that "Scripture alone" doesn't mean "me alone." The Bible nowhere gives any hint of wanting every individual believer to decide for himself and by himself what is and is not the true meaning of Scripture. The classical Reformed doctrine of *sola scriptura* meant that Scripture is the sole final and infallible authority. It does not mean that the lone individual is the one to determine what that Scripture means. Scripture was given to the Church within a certain pre-existing doctrinal context that had been preached by the Apostles for decades. Solo *scriptura* denies the necessity of that context, and it denies the necessity of that Church. In doing so it denies Christ who established that Church and who taught that doctrine to His disciples. It is rebellion in the name of God against the authority of God for the sake of preserving the authority of man.

SUMMARY

Proponents of solo *scriptura* have deceived themselves into thinking that they honor the unique authority of Scripture. But unfortunately, by divorcing the Spirit-inspired Word of God from the Spirit-indwelt people of God, they have made it into a plaything and the source of endless speculation. If a proponent of solo *scriptura* is honest, he recognizes that it is not the infallible Scripture to which he ultimately appeals. His appeal is *always* to his own fallible interpretation of that Scripture. With solo *scriptura* it cannot be any other way, and this necessary

relativistic autonomy is the fatal flaw of solo *scriptura* that proves it to be an un-Christian tradition of men.

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