

Contemporary Responses to *Sola Scriptura*: Implications for Adventist Theology

By Kwabena Donkor

Responses to *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone) today are divided into positive and negative camps as briefly outlined below. Within the positive camp there are differences which reflect one's view of Scripture. After all, if the *sola* is predicated on Scripture, then one's *sola scriptura* principle will be conditioned by one's view of Scripture to which the *sola* is attached. We should not be naïve to think that today *sola scriptura* has a univocal meaning. In this study, we shall examine some positive and negative responses to *sola scriptura* with attention to its implications for Adventist theology.

Positive Perspectives

Positive responses to the Reformers' *sola scriptura* principle have been categorized into micro, macro, and mega perspectives.¹ Carl Braaten is representative of the micro view, which takes its cue from Luther's material principle.² Braaten maintains a kerygmatic idea of *sola scriptura* and criticizes Protestant orthodoxy for shifting the grounding of biblical authority "from Luther's gospel-communicating Bible to orthodoxy's inerrant Holy Manuscript."³ For Braaten, *sola scriptura* means that the kerygmatic "canon within the canon" must be applied to Scripture itself. This perspective of biblical authority has a history among luminaries who stressed the Bible's authority from different material viewpoints: Barth (God's self-revelation), Cullmann (record of salvation history), Bultmann (kerygmatic announcement of Christ-event, generating new self-understanding of faith).⁴

James Packer goes beyond Braaten and has a macro perspective on *sola scriptura*. He is critical of Braaten's view which he sees as limiting Scriptural normativity. Packer understands the Reformers' view to be that Scripture, "as the *only* Word of God in this world, is the *only* guide for conscience and the church, the *only* source of true knowledge of God and grace, and the *only* qualified judge of the church's testimony and teaching, past and present."⁵ Parker's position is by and large representative of the evangelical position.

The mega perspective on Scriptural authority is a foundationalist position which argues for biblical foundations in order to provide "a secure truth base for confidence in the epistemological enterprise itself."⁶ Gordon Clarke is representative of this view. Mary Crumpacker notes that "While Clark concurs that science cannot be the standard for the Church, his solution of course would be to reject modern scientism altogether and adopt as the test for all truth the orthodox Protestant criterion—namely, the Bible."⁷ The three positive contemporary views on *sola scriptura* outlined above differ only in the range of the Bible's authority either as the only source of the gospel; or gospel and doctrine; or gospel, doctrine and metaphysics respectively. In our post-critical age, however, there is much negativity regarding the *sola scriptura* principle.

Negative Perspectives

It should be clear by now that the fortune of the *sola scriptura* principle was, from the beginning, inextricably tied to the general Protestant Scripture principle. The Scripture principle was the necessary presupposition of the *sola scriptura* principle. Although critical of it, Carl Braaten summarizes the Scripture principle well. "The Scriptures are the written deposit of revelation which God communicated to the prophets and apostles by means of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God was the real author of the Scriptures; the human writers were the instruments which God used to produce the Bible."⁸ Already before the last quarter of the previous century Wolfhart Pannenberg was writing about the crisis of the Scripture principle in Protestant theology.⁹ The crisis of the Scripture principle also meant a crisis in the *sola scriptura* principle. At the heart of this crisis, in Pannenberg's view, is the universal validity of theology as a science for, he notes, "if theology and secular sciences make different and opposite statements about the world, man, and history, then the

question which of these statements are true cannot be rejected.”¹⁰ In the light of the European Enlightenment, adaptations of theology to modern scientific thought took a liberal turn which could not preserve central elements of the Christian faith. The result is that Protestantism today is represented by a conservative tradition which holds onto the Scripture principle, and looks at theology as a positive science of revelation. But Pannenberg thinks that this approach is not sustainable in contemporary times.

On his part, Carl Braaten writes about the shattering of *sola scriptura*, and also traces it to the blows of Enlightenment criticism.¹¹ Since Protestant orthodoxy based biblical authority on its divine origin and inspiration, the defense of the Bible in the face of criticism took an evidentiary form: miracles, fulfilled prophecies, etc. Meanwhile, methods of historical criticism which were generally applied to all ancient writings were now applied without hesitation to the biblical documents. Among others, the result of this application tried to show that the deeds and words ascribed to Jesus were a mixture of fact and interpretation; and a multiplicity of theologies were said to be present in the New Testament. The chief result of all this, in Braaten’s view, is that biblical authority can no longer function as it did before the rise of historical critical consciousness. “The Bible has lost its privilege of holding an *a priori* position of authoritativeness.”¹² In his view, the need now arises for theologians to shift the case for biblical authority from *a priori* to *a posteriori* grounds.

It is easy to see how the so-called shattering of the Scripture principle touches the perfections of Scripture¹³ which undergird the *sola scriptura* principle. When reason is applied to the **authority** of the Scripture as one of its perfections, the Bible can only count as one of many competing sources. John Macquarrie¹⁴ takes this route and in more recent times the Wesleyan quadrilateral¹⁵ has been read by some in this way. A common strategy of this approach is to make revelation an over-arching concept which is then predicated of all the other sources such as reason, tradition, and experience. Thomas Oden, for example, in responding to the question regarding how the worshipping community knows what it seems to know notes that

The study of God relies constantly upon an interdependent quadrilateral of sources on the basis of which the confessing community can articulate, make consistent and integrate the witness to revelation. These four are scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, all of which depend upon and exist as a response to their necessary premise: revelation.¹⁶

The **necessity** of Scripture is also affected by the crisis in the Scripture principle. It is argued that in the postmodern, pluralistic, relativistic context, singling out the Christian Scriptures and giving it pre-eminence is not possible. Ted Peters thinks that to do so is to revert to a first naïveté concept of the *sola scriptura* which is impossible due to the rise of historical consciousness.¹⁷

Ted Peters takes issue with the **clarity** of Scripture and argues that what may have been possible in Luther’s time is not possible today. According to him, “it requires incredible intellectual naïveté to accept” the three assumptions that supported the clarity of Scripture (the identity of the literal sense of the Bible with its historical and natural content, the possible identification of the Reformers’ doctrine with the content of scriptural writings, trust in the Holy Spirit to work directly through the text).¹⁸ While Luther may not have needed to make intellectual detours through concepts of myth before making assertions, critical consciousness has estranged the contemporary world from the world of meaning found in Scripture.

The challenge to the **sufficiency** of Scripture today comes in the form of developments in some of the charismatic renewal movements where it is argued that divine prophecy is heard today, and is in some ways at par with the word of an Isaiah or a Jeremiah.

These are the burdens under which the *sola scriptura* principle operates today. And to conclude our discussion we need to make some observations and reflections on how Adventists ought to relate to these findings and developments.

Implications for Adventist Theology

1. A key observation to anchor about the Reformers' use of the *sola scriptura* principle is that it was, first and foremost, a hermeneutical principle of authority. Popular understanding of the principle tends to be "statistical," but that was not the Reformers' position. The critical issue was that while the Roman Catholic Church wanted Fathers, Council, Popes, and ecclesiastical traditions to be *regula fidei* of the Church's faith, the Reformers deemed Scriptures alone sufficient to serve that function. The facts of the situation were that the Roman Catholic Church believed in the formal authority of the Bible. However, by giving tradition *regula fidei* status, it inevitably became an additional source of authoritative truth.

Noting subsequently that the Reformation viewpoint will not be appreciated if it functions only in a polemic with Rome, Berkouwer notes: "We never deal with a blank sheet of paper. Certain traditions—not as additions but interpretations—may even become attached to the life of the church in the course of time to the extent that practically they have the features of additions and are therefore out of reach of the critical and sovereign Word of God."¹⁹

2. Luther's emphasis on the gospel as a "canon within the canon" leads to the conclusion that, at least from that perspective, Adventists do not go completely along with the Reformers *sola scriptura* principle. For Luther, this instrument was a powerful and critical authoritative principle, even for making distinctions in the canon. While as Adventists we rightly criticize Luther's canon within the canon, it seems that a mere formal acceptance of the principle is not enough. The different contemporary positive responses to *sola scriptura* is a reflection of this problem. The issue becomes even more critical upon contemplating the fact that interpretation was at the core of the Reformers' dispute with Rome. In our context, hermeneutics has come to occupy an even more central place in theological discourse. The question remains for reflection whether *sola scriptura*, as a *formal* principle,²⁰ requires a *material* principle/s to be a complete principle of authority.²¹

3. A major concern from the perspective of maintaining *sola scriptura* in the contemporary context relates to the supernatural nature of the Bible. Parker agrees with James Barr in distinguishing between "hard" and "soft" concepts of authority, and observes that while most Protestants espouse a "soft" view of biblical authority, that of the Reformers was as "hard" as could be.²² The Reformers could maintain a "hard" idea of authority because "they were concerned to ascribe to the Scriptures an absolute divine authority springing from the fact that God then and now says to us what they say."²³

It is imperative to stress that *sola scriptura* stands or falls with the *a priori* acceptance or rejection of biblical authority. Ted Peters represent the post-critical situation well when he emphasizes that in the pluralistic context we as human choose, "but in choosing we must see ourselves as the chooser. In effect we confer authority, not simply accepting it. Existentially, we cannot help but put ourselves in a position of authority higher than that to which we decide to submit, even if it is listening to the message of the Bible. The buck stops at home."²⁴ This approach cannot be compatible with *sola scriptura* even if the basis of our decision to submit to Scripture is based on a biblical concept such as, say, love. The call for an *a priori* acceptance of biblical authority, however, requires an even more careful development of our doctrines of revelation and inspiration.

4. Maintaining *sola scriptura* today requires that we accept the unity of Scripture, not only in theory, but in practice. The fashion is common in contemporary biblical studies to focus on contrasts in style and vocabulary and, in some cases, thereby deny what Parker calls any such thing as "the biblical theology."²⁵ It seems that much of contemporary biblical studies in academic settings are set up in this way. The challenge for us is to be able to speak and write about the unique viewpoints of different biblical writers without

unwittingly giving the impression, for example, that the writings of Luke-Acts or Paul should be separated out and kept distinct.²⁶ Cole expresses the significance of this point quite eloquently.

Some judgment as to the gravamen of the divine purpose is essential if the formal and material aspects of Scripture are to be held together. Authority to what end? Clarity in what areas? These questions are related to the more basic one of the purpose of Scripture conceived as a whole. Such a line of thinking is unpopular at present, in an academic environment in which the diversity of Scripture is seen rather than its unity. However, to abandon the notion of the unity of Scripture makes theological exegesis of its contents Sisyphean to say the least.²⁷

5. The *sola scriptura* principle reveals a complex understanding of Scripture that is not usually appreciated. It seems to me that Adventists do not espouse *sola scriptura* in the *exact* sense in which Luther did it. Because of Luther's strong emphasis on the material principle of Scriptural authority, Adventists are quick to add *tota scriptura* (all of Scripture) to the *sola scriptura* formulation. The idea is to forestall Luther's canon within the canon approach. Finally, I wish to suggest that emphasizing the hermeneutical nature of the *sola scriptura* principle may help to clarify the issue of the Spirit of Prophecy's relationship to the Bible. A statistical understanding of *sola scriptura* is what appears to perplex folk regarding the place of Spirit of Prophecy writings in Adventist theology.

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¹Graham Cole, "Sola Scriptura: Some Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," *Churchman* 104/1 (1990), 30.

²"Material principle" refers to the gospel as understood by the Reformation. The "formal principle" refers to the Bible, which was considered the source and norm of the "material principle."

³Carl E. Braaten, "Can We Still Hold The Principle of Sola Scriptura?" *Dialog* 20 (1981), 190.

⁴*Ibid.*, 03.

⁵J. I. Packer, "'Sola Scriptura' in History and Today" in John W. Montgomery (ed.) *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1973), 48-49.

⁶Cole, 26.

⁷Mary M. Crumpacker, "Clarke's Axiom: Something New?" *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 32/3 (1989), 357.

⁸Braaten (190) adds these further details. "The process of inspiration pertained to both the subject matter and the verbal forms of Scripture. God provided the correct ideas in the minds of the authors (*suggestion res*), the exact words to use (*dictatio verborum*), as well as the stimulus to write them down (*impulsus scriben*).

⁹Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Crisis of the Scripture-Principle in Protestant Theology," *Dialog* 2/4 (1963), 307-313.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 308.

¹¹Braaten, 191.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³"Perfections of Scripture" is a theological expression to refer to the principal characteristics of Scripture, such as, e.g., authority, necessity, clarity, sufficiency.

¹⁴See chapter I of John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1966).

¹⁵The four sources used by John Wesley to reach theological conclusions: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.

¹⁶Thomas C. Oden, *The living God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

¹⁷Ted Peters, "Sola Scriptura and the Second Naivete," *Dialog* 16 (1977), p. 270. The first naivete is the state of development in human consciousness where things are accepted unreflectively, or what Bernard Lonergan referred to as undifferentiated consciousness.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁹G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 305.

²⁰See n. 2 above.

²¹ For example, with reference to Adventists, is the General Conference in Session for us a sufficient material principle? And, how may we ensure that it does not end up overcoming the formal principle?

²² See Packer, 50–51, “A ‘hard’ idea would mean that the authority of the Bible was (i) antecedent to its interpretation and (ii) general in its application. The reader or user of the bible would be expected to *expect* that biblical passages would be authoritative and therefore illuminating... and this expectation would be firm before the interpretation was carried out, and not therefore be a decision based afterwards upon the results of the interpretation. A ‘soft’ idea of authority would suggest that authority was (i) posterior to interpretation and (ii) limited according to the passages where an authoritative effect had in fact been found.”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Peters, 271.

²⁵ Ibid., 52.

²⁶ Ibid., 53.

²⁷ Cole, 29.

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