

Response to “*Sola Scriptura*—Reformation’s Ecclesial Legacy”*

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One of Martin Luther’s major contributions to the Church is his initiation of the return to constructive theology in dialogue with the Scripture. After the rigorous theological constructivism of the early church, culminating in the solidification of the creeds, the succeeding centuries were characterized by theological stagnation. Although Scholasticism and the philosophical theologians of the Medieval era produced numerous theological treatises, most of these writings were only a strengthening of the already affirmed dogma. Medieval theology perfectly exemplified Anselm’s *fides quaerens intellectum*.** Theologians deepened their understanding of already conceived doctrines, often overstressing them and their implications to absurd proportions. (One example is the Medieval doctrine of grace which led to the official affirmation of correlated doctrines of merit, penance, and indulgences. In short, theological deepening resulted in awry theological affirmations.) Moreover, in the search for the deep, theologians neglected the broad. Perhaps unintentionally, the other important themes of the Scripture that are outside the already existing system of doctrinal affirmations were ignored.

Luther’s constructive theology came because of his re-discovery of the Scriptures. His Reformation cry *sola Scriptura* was not only defensive and polemic in nature against the [Roman] Catholic Church. Rather, he passionately affirmed *sola Scriptura* because he saw things there that filled the missing holes in the Catholic dogma. His ardent commitment to the Word in the Diet of Worms shows that he was no longer convinced by mere tradition-utterances. The Scriptures are and must be the sole authority for Christian doctrine and life.

However, Luther’s re-discovery of the Scriptures and the hermeneutical

* This paper is a response to Dr. Jason Valeriano Hallig’s Reformation celebration address, “*Sola Scriptura*—Reformation’s Ecclesial Legacy,” pages 1–14, above.

** *Fides quaerens intellectum*: faith seeking understanding.

freedom he assumed and promoted was the first falling piece of the domino that triggered something quite dangerous. Since Luther's open and successful revolt against the established church, and the honoring we ascribe to his schismatic Protestant movement, the unity of Christianity was left in a precarious state. Although I agree that there are benefits to the hermeneutical freedom that Luther re-initiated and exemplified, the Reformation (1) spirit of excessive cynicism towards tradition, (2) wanton rejection of magisterial doctrines, and (3) cruel trashing of ecclesial leaders and official dogma that were inherited by the Protestant churches have left devastating consequences on the unity of the church. The idea that one man can challenge the whole Church, be successful, and even be celebrated left a lasting impression among post-Medieval intellectuals and commoners alike. Coupled with the rise of Rene Descartes's influential philosophy of doubt and modern science's proposed empirical tools of verification, a so-called "hermeneutic of suspicion" firmly rooted itself particularly among Protestant thinkers. The majority of succeeding Protestant scholars of Europe, capitalizing on these Reformation sentiments, generously contributed to a plethora of competing voices within Christianity that threatened to collapse the Church from within.

Hermeneutical freedom towards the Scripture has been blown out of proportion since Luther's time. It is not difficult to connect the dots between Luther's attitude of hermeneutical and theological prerogative and the attitude of most Protestant scholars concerning the authority of the church and the Scriptures during the eighteenth century, especially at the peak of the Enlightenment. Luther became the saint patron of cynicism towards the church's truth claims and "traditional" interpretative procedures. The emphasis shifted from a more communal interpretation to individual prerogative. Moreover, the hype seems to lean towards the more un-traditional (or un-ecclesial) modes of thinking and interpretation. For instance, what gathered support were the individualistic interpretations of Herman Reimarus and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who proposed that the New Testament writers wrote to serve their selfish religious and political ends; of David Strauss (1808–1874), who suspected the historicity of the gospel narratives and blatantly branded them as myths; and of Johannes Weiss (1863–1914), who argued that Jesus was misrepresented by the gospel writers as the incarnate God when He was only a mere human revolutionary. These are just a few

examples.

Moreover, as made evident by many church splits, it would appear that Protestants have truly inherited the Reformers' acclaimed hermeneutical freedom that led ultimately to the Catholic-Protestant split. It is intriguing that many church schisms are the result of doctrinal differences on particular topics, influenced by personal hermeneutical procedures and biases. The sheer number of denominations and so-called "independent churches" illustrate the danger posed by individualistic hermeneutical freedom. To be fair to the Reformers, they certainly never intended for their future Protestant followers to feel unconstrained in using the Bible to promote doctrinal diversity and legitimize schisms and splits. The problems arise when the priesthood of all believers is stretched to mean freedom of expression at the expense of humility and at the cost of unity. Whether we dare to admit or not, hermeneutical freedom may be abused by some to promote their own understanding and advance their own little kingdoms.

Finally, hermeneutical freedom can also be used to promote and advocate an unbridled pluralism. This is already happening. John Hick's unorthodox interpretation and semantic arguments have led to a unique form of Christianity. Interpretations of Jesus' person, life, and work influenced by previous commitments to world religions have produced bewildering Christ-reconstructions that are almost Scripturally unrecognizable. In the Philippines alone, the hermeneutics of Felix Manalo and Apollo Quiboloy gave birth to two heretical Christian sects. Basically, if everyone is an equally self-authenticating interpreter, the consequence is not really unity within one Christianity. Rather, the result is a multiplicity of Christianities. It would be delightful if the points of contention are doctrinal non-essentials, but what if the various interpretations are mutually exclusive and are about Christology, pneumatology, and even soteriology? As history reveals, the most logical consequence of difference is to split, something that Luther's Reformation exemplified.

What I want to affirm is Luther's advocacy to scriptural fidelity. Ruthless self-criticism of our own theological traditions is a must. We must always bring our own understanding and traditions subject to the Word. Otherwise, our lack of self-introspection might lead to faithfulness to tradition

at the expense of the Scripture's message (see Matt 15:3). Luther exemplified what it means to be ready to reform one's own tradition from within. It is not our role to criticize other traditions of their supposed doctrinal errors and failures. Rather, like Luther, we must serve as prophets to our own denominations and groups. But our hermeneutical freedom must not lead to creating further schisms to an already divided body of Christ. What value is there in advocating the truth while sowing seeds of discontent and contempt against our leaders and the church? Yes, we must learn from and imitate Luther's courage and unyielding faithfulness to the Scriptures. But we must also recognize and un-learn his impulsivity, unconstrained speech, and Protestantism. What we must ask ourselves is this: Is there a way for us to advocate hermeneutical freedom and still remain humble, submissive to the church, and tolerant of divergent opinions? Only when we find the answer to this question can we be certain that our differences of opinion and hermeneutical results does not endanger the catholicity of the church.