

# VERDICT

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## ***Sola Scriptura* and Contemporary New Testament Scholarship in Dialogue**

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**Editorial Note:** The following essay is selected from a paper by J. Philip Arnold, entitled “*Sola Scriptura* and Contemporary New Testament Scholarship in Dialogue,” written under the tutelage of Dr. Werner Kelber.

The Reformation principle *sola scriptura* continues even in the twentieth century to be the guiding and foundational principle for many major Protestant denominations and sects. Baptists, Churches of Christ, Adventists, and millions of other evangelical Christians 1 continue to uphold this watchword of the Reformation. Members of this multitudinous left-wing Protestant force cling to the belief that the example of the “primitive church,” as expressed in the New Testament documents, must be the criterion by which the contemporary church is directed. Since the “early church” of the first century was the fountainhead of the Christian movement, the ideals represented in the New Testament by this church are authoritative for subsequent disciples. The argument states that this witness continues in a codified, static form in the canonical literature. All that is necessary for salvation and all that can legitimately be required by a church of its members for Christian fellowship is that which is sanctioned in this witness. The famous slogan of the nineteenth-century Restoration movement under the auspices of Alexander Campbell expresses this sentiment precisely: “Where the scriptures speak, we speak, and where the scriptures are silent, we are silent.” 2

Although other Protestant denominations and, of course, the Roman Church do not accept such a limited interpretation of *sola scriptura*, the fact remains that hundreds of seminaries and millions of Christians do adhere to this understanding of *sola scriptura*. The purpose of this essay is *not* to call into question such a position. This essay clearly

faces up to the fact that conservative Christianity will continue to maintain such a view of scripture. Instead of attacking the position of those who believe that the New Testament documents serve as the authority for determining “matters of faith and morals,” this essay will attempt to engage in dialogue with this position. Such a dialogue will open the doors for a fulfillment of the opportunity for conservative, evangelical Christianity to benefit from the insights offered by the latest methods and results of Biblical scholarship. This dialogue will attempt to point the direction in which evangelical Christianity may safely remove its head from the sand and boldly face the light of scholarship. Such a confrontation with light will no doubt reveal new turns for evangelical Christianity to negotiate, but the path called *sola scriptura* need not be effaced. It is important for both proponents of the evangelical interpretation of *sola scriptura* and its opponents to realize that, without dialogue between the latest scholarship and evangelical Christianity, each group will charge off in opposite directions and “never the twain shall meet.” Such a rejection may be ratified with a hearty “good riddance” from both sides of the gallery; however, such an attitude possesses a haughty spirit of pride condemned in these New Testament documents to which form critics, redaction critics, and evangelical Christians have devoted so very much of their lives.

The picture of first-century Christianity emerging from modern scholarship is one in which rival interpretations of the Jesus sayings and of the Jesus traditions and, thus, of the Kerygma battled one another for dominance. ... In 1 Corinthians ... [Paul is portrayed] urging his brand of Kerygma on the Corinthians, some of whom were advocating a type of Christianity Paul rejected. The opponents proclaimed that they were the true representatives of Jesus and stigmatized Paul as the heretic. Robinson believes that in order to bolster their position, Paul’s opponents appealed to Jesus’ teachings. Clearly, this one example is potent enough to illustrate the rethinking that all Christians must do in order to incorporate the findings of scholarship.

In his essay, *Gnomai Diaphoroi*, Koester focuses on the diversity which permeated earliest Christianity and reinforces the discoveries and implications of Robinson’s insights. Koester writes,

**It is certainly untenable that the Orthodox Church and only this Orthodox Church was the direct offspring of the teachings, doctrines and institutions of the apostles’ times. ... We have to do here with a religious movement which is syncretistic in appearance and conspicuously marked by diversification from the very beginning. 3**

The emerging picture of early Christianity is one fraught with confrontations between Jerusalem Christians versus Stephen Christians, Paulinists versus legalists, gnostics versus Johannine Christians, etc. The outcome of these struggles was that by the end of the first century there existed around Ephesus, for example, several rival Christian “schools”: a Jewish-Christian group with Cerinthian protognostic overtones; a sect

called in Revelation 2:6 the Nicolaitans; a Jewish-Christian group under the leadership of the author of Revelation; and a Pauline church led by an Essene-influenced Paulinist (in the spirit of the Epistle to the Ephesians). 4 In time a growing orthodoxy would censure and condemn some of these Christian schools and others, driving them from the field into hiding or extinction.

Proponents of the principle of *sola scriptura* should welcome these insights into the character of earliest Christianity, for they augment the understanding of the contents of the New Testament. If evangelical Christianity is faithful to its principle of *sola scriptura*, it must hold no allegiance whatsoever to what has traditionally been mislabeled as orthodoxy. This means that the principle of *sola scriptura*, consistently applied, takes one's eyes off the creedal statements and theological formulations contrived by orthodoxy in order to express its faith and to distinguish itself from heterodoxy. Instead of looking to and naively accepting the expressions of the meaning of Christianity evoked by such orthodox thinkers as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, evangelical Christians are to be responsive to the findings of Biblical scholarship regarding the content of the New Testament documents. Only by such attentiveness can evangelical Christians maintain their commitment to *sola scriptura*. How important it is for such Christians to break free of an inherent tendency to hearken to the teachings of extra-Biblical authorities (named above) instead of enjoying the liberty unto which their own principle of *sola scriptura* calls them. A consistent application of their own principle of authority would free them from despairing of recent scholarly discoveries which establish the dissimilarities between traditional orthodoxy and New Testament religion.

Some have thought that Christians in the Roman tradition are better equipped to utilize the results afforded by New Testament scholarship due to their acceptance of the place of tradition and church authority in determining matters of faith and morals. It is true that the Roman faith can approach such scholarship without the presence of the same sense of responsibility to implement the findings into their worship and theology which must accompany those who consistently adhere to *sola scriptura*. The latter group confronts the findings of scholarship with a sense of grave responsibility, for it is cognizant of the fact that such findings may well alter the religious stance and practice of those who attempt to pattern their faith after that of the early Christian church as expressed in the New Testament. This sense of grave responsibility produces a certain hesitancy to accept new ideas, but a consistent application of *sola scriptura* produces a dynamism and spark which drives the adherent onward in an attempt to recapture the uniqueness of the Christian past so as to make it his own. In other words, there is present in the evangelical Christian loyalty to *sola scriptura* a quality reminiscent of the mythical motif of the eternal return. 5 This means that there exists a powerful drive to return to *illud tempus*— to a primordial world— to a true meaning of the early Christian documents by which the faithful can pattern contemporary worship. Yet this pattern

may never be regarded as final but must always be regarded as an approximation of the real— reality which scholarship may bring into sharper focus through each new discovery. In their earnest desire to approximate the real, adherents of *sola scriptura* enjoy the privilege of being free to change their present views and eagerly accept the recent penetrations of scholarship into the real world of the New Testament.

An important question remains: Is the return to the primordial world a return to the time when form prevailed over chaos or a return to chaos itself? In other words, due to the diversity so prevalent in early Christianity, a return to such a world as authoritative would appear to offer nothing but confusion. However, evangelical Christianity does not affirm in its principle of *sola scriptura* that there should be an imitation of the chaotic Christianity prevalent in the first century. It recognizes the findings of scholars such as Bauer, Robinson, and Koester regarding the condition of first-century Christianity; but, remember, it finds its form in its principle of *sola scriptura*, not in chaos itself. That is, it affirms, rightly or wrongly, that Christianity is most vital when it returns to the source of its strength, the church as *is portrayed* in the New Testament documents.

Yet, in the light of redaction criticism which finds “chaos” in the New Testament as a whole, despite finding form in individual books, evangelical Christianity must be at pains to amend itself on several fronts. To exemplify the problem: if evangelical Christians seek to emulate the teachings of the New Testament, which teachings will they choose to incorporate? Will they choose to proclaim Jesus as a Heavenly Redeemer as in John, or will they opt for Jesus as the suffering one empowered after his resurrection as in Paul? Will such Christians live in apocalyptic expectation as did the community of John of the Apocalypse, or will they de-emphasize Adventism as the Lukan material may suggest? Will they live in a semi-realized eschatology as found in the latter or deutero-Pauline writings and the Gospel of John, or will they adopt an eschatological reservation position apparently advocated by Paul in 1 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians? There are more issues to decide, such as choosing between following the commands of Matthew’s Gospel relative to observance of Torah and the commands of Paul to the Galatians which did not emphasize law-keeping. This leads to the issue of why justification by faith plays such a role in Paul’s writings, but much less elsewhere, as well as whether or not the concept of vicarious suffering appears in Luke-Acts. In the face of such problems, what must those do who choose to continue faithful to *sola scriptura*?

There are three avenues open to evangelical Christians which will enable them to absorb the revelations from New Testament scholarship. All three approaches need to be employed to some degree in order to maintain the principle of *sola scriptura* as the foundation to which evangelical Christianity must hearken. The first principle which traditionally has been overworked can be characterized as “harmonization.” No longer

is it rationally possible to obviate all the diversity prevalent in the New Testament through a naive harmonization of what are distinct positions. It must be recognized that there are different views regarding Jesus, the Kerygma, predestination, pre-existence, law and gospel in the New Testament. In some cases the various views may be combined to form a mosaic, but in many instances harmonization can now take place only on a new level. This level recognizes distinct and unique views of reality which are not always corollaries of one another but, on the other hand, are not always mutually exclusive of one another. For example, the issue of predestination can be cited as a case in which certain Pauline references seem to contradict other Pauline statements as well as non-Pauline statements. Harmonization through the admission of paradoxical realities can be employed in order to permit the position of *sola scriptura* to remain intact— after all, such utilizations of paradox have been used in philosophical theology to account for the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man as well as in ascertaining the true significance of Mark's Gospel, which offers a Jesus of power in its first half and a suffering Jesus in its second half. 6 In some cases paradox can be accorded its proper place as a proper symbol offering man an insight into reality. In other cases the distinct "theologies" present specific insights into a multifaceted whole. Theologically speaking, the *pleroma* of Christ is just that rich.

Yet, after all has been said, there remains little question that the New Testament itself, critically examined, presents a church replete with rival factions promoting contrary opinions. Not only has redaction criticism shown the distinct "stances" in the New Testament documents, but the rival parties in Corinth and the Jerusalem council have long been recognized as evidence for a disunited "primitive Christianity." 7 Evangelical Christians must face this fact squarely and act in accordance with their foundational principle of *sola scriptura* by employing the second avenue open to them. They must expand their borders, drop their long-held doctrinal statements, and be content to emulate the New Testament church by permitting the presence and "orthodoxy" of views once considered heretical. No longer can Christians who disregard certain doctrines be considered outside the pale of orthodoxy. "Orthodoxy" must open its borders to receive its "heretical" brothers in order to reproduce the New Testament church, which scholarship reveals to have been replete with diversity and fragmentation. For example, no longer can evangelical Christianity burn at fiery stakes such Christians as Michael Servetus— the anti-Trinitarian executed in Calvin's Geneva. The principle of *sola scriptura*, consistently followed, rejects such philosophical accretions as creedal formulations and theological systems as tests for orthodoxy. Following the discoveries made by such scholars as those of the "trajectory school" and redaction critics; proponents of *sola scriptura* recognize the uselessness of such categories as "orthodoxy" and "heretical." In its attempt to adhere to *sola scriptura*, evangelical Christianity must swing wide its doors to all those who find a place in the New Testament documents. Such a theological principle gives rise to an ethic which places a premium on tolerance, equality, and love.

Does this then mean there are no guidelines for evangelical Christians except that which says any theology or position reflected in *sola scriptura* is acceptable? The third avenue open for evangelical Christians aids in ameliorating the possible deterioration of such Christianity into an amorphous state. There remains the important recognition that there are certain uniquely Christian insights which pass as a thread from document to document in the New Testament. From these few strands it is possible that a theology of the New Testament can be created. For example, there is evidence that from earliest times the Christian communities possessed complex Christological thinking as the presence of the early hymn in Philippians 2 indicates. The exact nature of this thinking has yet to be determined, but its presence here and elsewhere offers an opportunity for form to be given to the chaos. Also, the belief in the resurrection is another assertion held as normative throughout the New Testament documents. It is clear to me that various communities placed different emphases on and possessed varied descriptions of the resurrection event, but from 1 Corinthians (15:1-5) and Galatians (1:1, 8, 23; and 2:6) it can be determined that Paul and the Jerusalem church were in essential agreement on the Kerygma regarding the resurrection of Jesus. Another common feature which was normative was that somehow in Jesus God was working in a way which would result in returning man to God. These are some theological norms which the New Testament provides those who adhere to the principle of *sola scriptura*.

Furthermore, as evangelical Christianity has long recognized, particularly those of the dispensational school, certain areas of scripture speak more directly to post-apostolic and Gentile Christianity than others. In accordance with this recognition, the Old Testament has not possessed in evangelical circles the same relevance to the Christian dispensation as has the New Testament. An amplification of this insight has been long employed by those evangelicals termed ultradispensationalists, who recognize that the New Testament documents themselves possess particular messages for particular communities, not all of which are relevant for the post-apostolic Gentile communities. Evangelical Christians must consider the possibility of attributing less relevance for twentieth-century Gentile Christianity to, for example, the Gospel of Matthew, which appears to offer its theological insights to a Jewish-Christian community. In the light of the contents of the Pauline and Johannine corpus, is it consistent with *sola scriptura* to seek ecclesiastical guidelines in such sources as Matthew? This suggestion does not violate *sola scriptura*, for its impetus does not arise out of rationalization alone but suggests itself when one studies the teachings of Paul, particularly in Galatians. Such a position as that of ultradispensationalism, which in this way locates a canon within the canon, appears to employ the results of Biblical scholarship without negation of *sola scriptura*.

This essay has attempted to open the doors for dialogue between two conventicles

which express intense interest in the documents of the New Testament and early Christianity, evangelical proponents of *sola scriptura* and those Biblical scholars not aligned with the evangelicals. The diversity extant in early Christianity has been seen to have found expression in the documents of the New Testament, and the impact of culture on early Christianity has been discussed. The interesting development arising out of this examination has been the opposition evangelical Christianity possesses for a methodology which emphasizes impinging forms and transpersonal, transhistorical movements 8 which obviate or becloud the role of the authors of New Testament documents. Advocates of *sola scriptura* have been interested in the particular insight intended by the writer for his readers, an insight which they can accept as related to the *sitz im leben* of his community. Such an approach underscores the close relationship which exists between evangelical Christianity and redaction criticism regarding authorial autonomy. Neither group contends that there exists such a condition as total autonomy, for each recognizes the influence of the cultural milieu in which Christianity arose. At the same time, both groups place a premium on the creativity, genius, and “inspiration” of the individual authors of the various New Testament documents. These authors are viewed as more than mere victims of the cultural nexus in which they find themselves. The New Testament arose under the influence of the culture of the times but contains unique messages arising out of selection, modification, and adoption. This process combines with the creative intentionality of the author, who addressed himself to the needs of his community and thus imposed himself on the culture and that community.

If evangelical Christianity chooses to remain consistent with its principle of *sola scriptura*, it needs to be enriched by hearkening to the call of redaction and literary criticism. It must recognize the diversity within the New Testament and put into effect the implications arising from it. Such implications include an expansion of its borders to include rival, “unorthodox” Christian positions, rejection of traditional so-called orthodox creeds as tests of fellowship, and to begin searching for a broad “scriptural” base on which to re-establish some wide borders. Interestingly, such a de-emphasis by evangelical Christianity on doctrinal and theological gnosis as criteria for acceptance is not actually inconsistent with another traditional companion of *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*. For in the final analysis the Pauline corpus contends that man does not belong to the household of faith because of his “wisdom” but because of “pistis” [faith] in the Christ, who, as Paul informed his Corinthian opponents, is “made unto us wisdom.”

## Notes and References

1. “Evangelical Christianity” will serve as the designation for those Christians who contend that the New Testament documents’ depiction of early Christianity represents the authoritative source for instruction in “matters of faith and morals.” This designation was chosen instead of “conservative Christianity” since the latter has been associated with a wide variety of theological positions. The term “evangelical Christianity” enjoys a growing, widespread use and is not synonymous with “fundamentalism,” which presently denotes a narrow, literal Biblicism closed to the discoveries of

contemporary scholarship. The following remark by George Eldon Ladd in *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids, 1976), 18, imparts wisdom and insight to all involved in the study of the New Testament: ‘The old technique of Fundamentalists was to refute their opponents by proving they were liberals; this carried its own condemnation. It is often the technique of contemporary ‘critical’ scholars to refute their opponents by crying ‘conservative.’ This is precisely the fundamentalist technique of status by negation. Sound scholarship, regardless of theological persuasion, calls for openness without compromise, for understanding, and dialogue.’”

2. James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only: A History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati, 1962), 40, 45. 46.

3. James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971), 115, 117.

4. *Ibid.*, 154, 155.

5. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York, 1959), 88ff.

6. Werner Kelber, ed., *The Passion in Mark: Studies on Mark 14-16* (Philadelphia, 1976), 179, 180.

7. “View” or “stance” seems to be a more exact designation than “theologies” since the latter often implies a systematic formulation not found in the Judaeo-Christian literature. This literature is of a narrative nature from which facts are inferred rather than a theological system based on Hellenic logic (see G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts* [London, 1952], 11, 22, 23, 87, 88ff).

8. In order for the existence for such “forces” to be known, a historical account must be presented of their presence. Any attempt to establish historical evidence drives the scholar to the particular in history — which by its very nature (the particular) involves the scholar in methodologies which grant insight into the dynamics of a specific situation. Thus, there is no escaping the necessity of studying the “inner” development of early Christianity, for it is only by first knowing about it that larger generalizations and movements spawned by it can be discussed. The same principle applies to determining the extent of early Christianity’s participation in historical “movements” — the particular must be established in detail prior to its connection with the supposed movement.

9. 1 Corinthians 1:30.

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