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# Sola Scriptura: Some Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

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The classical Protestant doctrine of Holy Scripture is in trouble. On the one hand, there are the classic expressions of the doctrine to be found in tracts, confessions, articles of faith, catechisms and prayers of the past. These speak of a Scripture which is authoritative, God-inspired, revelatory, infallible, unified and canonically secure. On the other hand, since the rise of modern biblical criticism, historical consciousness, and hermeneutics of suspicion (courtesy of Marx and Freud) such a Bible to many scholars seems more of a hope than a reality. Thus, the solid Scripture of the past has for such become a time bound, literary collection of disparate, even disagreeing voices. Hence, Wolfhart Pannenberg writes of the 'Crisis of the Scripture Principle', arguing that 'The dissolution of the traditional doctrine of Scripture constitutes a crisis at the very foundations of modern Protestant theology.'<sup>1</sup>

The concept of *Sola Scriptura* (or Scripture alone) shares in the crisis of which Pannenberg speaks. For whatever the precise content of the concept, it is clear that employing the concept makes an extraordinary claim on behalf of Scripture. The appeal to *Sola Scriptura* appears to invest Scripture with, at the very least, a unique authority. Yet, in the paradoxical social context of the modern world, with its scientific orientation at some levels and mystical preoccupations at others, the very notion of biblical authority is contested.

The present paper seeks to examine the concept of *Sola Scriptura* – both its nature and validity – in today's climate. First, some historical contexts are sketched since *Sola Scriptura*, in Protestant circles, brings at the very least Luther and the sixteenth century quickly to mind. Next, some attention is directed to the relation of *Sola Scriptura*, in its several meanings, to the more inclusive doctrine of Scripture itself, as found in classical Protestantism (broadly speaking, that of the seventeenth century). Then the positive idea of *Sola Scriptura* is considered in its contemporary kerygmatic, doctrinal and foundationalist guises; before the focus shifts to a few of the many challenges to the viability of *Sola Scriptura* in the modern world. Penultimately some proposals for the redescription of *Sola Scriptura*

are offered. Lastly, by way of conclusion the discussion is rehearsed in brief.

## 1. *Sola Scriptura* Yesterday

*Sola Scriptura* was one of the great catch cries of the Reformation and along with the other *sola* formulae (*sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solo Christo*, *solis Deo gloria*) stood in opposition to Roman Catholic claims on behalf of tradition, merit, Mary and the saints.<sup>2</sup> Such was its importance that Melancthon described *Sola Scriptura* as the formal cause of the Reformation with *Sola Fide* as the material one.<sup>3</sup> The historical context, then, for *Sola Scriptura* was that of conflict between competing authorities. It is a principle rooted in polemics.

### (a) Luther and *Sola Scriptura*

For Luther, *Sola Scriptura* as a principle refers to Scripture as both the source and norm of the Christian gospel ('What preaches Christ') and the source and norm of the church's doctrine (as his defence of his sacramental position shows).<sup>4</sup> A generation later in the Book of Concord of 1580 the principle is clearly enshrined where both the Old and New Testaments are described as '... the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated. . . . The Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine . . .'.<sup>5</sup> The Bible, thus construed was clearly not only the norm of church's gospel, but also of its teaching in general. Scripture was therefore *norma normans* (the ruling norm). Other putative authorities such as tradition, reason and religious experience were *norma normata* (ruled norms, that is to say, ruled by Scripture).

### (b) A Puritan Debate and *Sola Scriptura*

The English Reformation displayed similar emphases. The accent on Scripture as the source and norm of the gospel is magnificently put in Article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles of 1562.

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.<sup>6</sup>

The title of the article is itself instructive 'Of the Sufficiency of the holy Scriptures for Salvation'. The English ordinal reveals a similar gravamen in the services for the ordination of a priest and bishop.<sup>7</sup>

However, in the second half of the sixteenth century a fierce controversy broke out between those who defended the established episcopal polity (for example, Whitgift and Hooker) and those who advocated further reform along presbyterian lines (for example, Cartwright and Travers).

Whitgift and Hooker, championing the status quo, argued that the

Scripture was both the source and norm of the church's preaching ('the things necessary for salvation'). But, church polity, they maintained, was a matter for wisdom and local adaptation. However Cartwright and Travers contested any such limitation of Scriptural relevance. On their view the Bible provided a regulative principle that covered not only gospel matters, but even those concerning details of worship and ecclesiastical organization.<sup>8</sup>

The participants in this debate showed at a formal level a general agreement on the rôle of Scripture as both the source and norm of doctrine. However, disagreement evidenced itself once the material question of the range of biblical normativity was considered. For example, Were biblical patterns of discipline included? In Cartwright's view, Whitgift, for example, would 'take up and shrink the arms of Scripture which otherwise are so long and large.'<sup>9</sup> Cartwright was indeed a Scriptural totalitarian as his own words make clear: 'I say the Word of God containeth the direction of all things, pertaining to the church, yea of whatsoever things can fall into any part of a man's life.'<sup>10</sup> Thus for Cartwright the New Testament – as far as the pattern of its ecclesial life was concerned – had not only historical authority (that is to say, as a true account of what happened), but also normative authority (that is as a binding account of what still ought to happen).<sup>11</sup>

An important feature of the debate, theologically considered, is that it shows that formal agreement on the Bible's authority both as a gospel book and as a source and norm of wider doctrine still left unsettled questions of a material kind; namely, What does wider doctrine include? and, With what degree of detail?

(c) Mosaic Science and *Sola Scriptura*

In the next century, the limits of biblical normativity became especially a matter of urgent debate as the new theories of cosmology made their impact upon European culture. Was Scripture to be the foundation for the study of the Book of Nature? or, Was the Book of Nature lucid in its own right? or Was Scripture open to reinterpretation in the light of Nature?

Both on the Continent (for example, Voetius in the Netherlands) and in England (for example, Alexander Ross) there were advocates of a scientific enterprise open to correction by appeal to the plain text of Scripture. For Ross the truth of astronomy does not confirm Scripture rather the truth of Scripture ought to confirm astronomy.<sup>12</sup> Voetius went further by maintaining that 'Holy Scripture teaches not only what is necessary for salvation, but also lays down the principles of all other good sciences and arts.'<sup>13</sup>

Indeed both on the Continent and in England there were champions for the so-called 'Mosaic science'. Even in the Royal Society itself there were supporters for a science founded on biblical texts. Cosmology, physics and chemistry so based on exegesis were con-

sciously opposed to the allegedly 'heathenish' philosophy of Aristotle. In reality Mosaic science turned out to be a projection on Scripture of a mix of hermetic and Paracelsist traditions.<sup>14</sup>

Though the foregoing examples have been few they are sufficient to suggest that both epistemological and criteriological questions lay at the heart of the use of the *Sola Scriptura* principle. The survey raises also the interesting question of the nature of a Scripture of which 'sola' may be predicated. Such a question brings both theological and logical consideration to the fore and to these considerations we now turn.

## **2. *Sola Scriptura* and the Classical Protestant Doctrine of Scripture**

For the evangelical Christian the equation of, 'What the Bible says', and 'God says' is a traditional one. Expressions such as, 'The Bible Teaches', and 'the Bible is God's Word', are familiar.<sup>15</sup> Yet, on reflection these simple statements may mask the fact that none of them is simply read off the face of the biblical text. Rather, they represent crystallizations of a complex theological mix. This complex theological construction is the classical Protestant doctrine of the Bible as the Word of God. And the adjective 'classical' reminds us of the immense amount of theological reflection that characterized the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries within Protestantism.<sup>16</sup>

The classical doctrine presupposes a God who makes himself known not only through nature, but also in history by word and deed.<sup>17</sup> On this view, the Bible represents inscripturated revelation and its authors at the human level are instruments of the divine revelatory and redemptive purpose; although not in such a way as to make their participation mechanical in execution, or monochrome in style. Moreover, inscripturated revelation is perfect; since it is invested with divine authority, necessary for our welfare, clear in its meaning and sufficient for the divine purpose. Such a revelation, since inspired by the living God Himself by His Spirit, is infallible. Indeed it stands supreme over all other rival claimants to authority in the world.

The foregoing parade of classical terms, though neither exhaustive nor nuanced, is sufficient to reveal a variety of interlocking concepts: revelation, inspiration, authority, necessity, clarity, sufficiency, infallibility and supremacy. These constituted a conceptual framework in which the Scriptures were read and from which – to use Puritan parlance – 'a body of divinity' was derived. The classical Protestant theological project also assumed the unity of this revelation, its canonical security, and the validity of grammatico-historical exegesis.

The sophistication of the classical Protestant doctrine of Scripture may be best highlighted by drawing attention to some striking parallels with the classical doctrine of the Trinity. Both doctrines deal

with the unique. Both claim to be faithful reflection on Scripture and warranted exegetically. Yet, neither is to be found on the surface of Scripture. Rather, the diverse and scattered biblical evidence (the *disiecta membra*) are through faithful prayerful reflection revealed in their organic unity at the level of theological synthesis (for example 2 Timothy 3:14–17, 2 Peter 1:20–21 *et al.* with regard to the Bible as the Word of God, and Deuteronomy 6:4–5, Matthew 28:18–20 *et al.* as regards the Trinity).

In Warfield's words such a move from the text of Scripture is ' . . . not passing from Scripture, but entering more thoroughly into the meaning of Scripture'.<sup>18</sup> Significantly he adds: 'We may state the doctrine in technical terms, supplied by philosophical reflection, but the doctrine stated is a genuinely Scriptural doctrine'.<sup>19</sup> Warfield's point is easily illustrated with regard to both doctrines. In the case of the doctrine of the Trinity the classic vocabulary includes: substance, person, coinherence, subsisting relation *et al.* As for the doctrine of Scripture one might add to the list already covered: concursus, plenary and so forth. Importantly both classical formulations allow – within broad agreements – further nuancing, whether on view is the question of *filioque* with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, or the limits of normativity (*auctoritas normativa*) when the doctrine of Scripture is under discussion.

*Sola Scriptura*, in systematic perspective, is an implicate of the perfections of Scripture.<sup>20</sup> The appeal to Scripture alone makes little sense if Scripture is without authority, or is unnecessary for human welfare, or is unclear as to its meaning, or is insufficient in terms of the divine intent. Moreover, whether the appeal to *Sola Scriptura* is to Scripture as a source, or norm or foundation – the perfections of Scripture are presupposed. What does need further nuancing, however, is the concept of divine intention. For ideas of divine intention will affect the limits of authority, necessity, clarity and sufficiency. Put another way, the language of the perfections of Scripture begs the question of perfections to what end?

It is important to note that neither the concept of supremacy nor that of sufficiency when alone applied to Scripture imply *Sola Scriptura*. Supremacy, for example, has to do with Scripture's relation to other valid, but lesser, authorities. Scripture is *norma normans* (the ruling norm), whilst the others, whether reason or experience or tradition, are the *norma normata* (the ruled norms). Scripture, then, may overrule. The sufficiency of Scripture – as one of the traditional perfections – speaks of its adequacy for a particular function. A Scripture of which 'sola' may be predicated would be both supreme and sufficient, but 'sola' suggests a necessity about Scripture that in isolation neither supremacy nor sufficiency need imply. An examination of the logic of 'sola' makes this point plain.

In brief, the logic of 'sola' has to do with the exclusion of rivals. Its

use indicates the presence of a limiting principle. In a television quiz show if *Sola Britannica* is the authority to be consulted in cases of dispute, then no other reference set has a claim. In the legal system, however, in cases of dispute there is usually a hierarchy of courts with a supreme court as the final court of appeal. Again, an axe is sufficient for chopping down a tree, but so is a chain saw. Neither supremacy, nor sufficiency imply necessity. *Sola Scriptura* does.

In this section the task has been to lay out some of *Sola Scriptura*'s logical geography. Thus *Sola Scriptura* has been placed in the broader framework of the doctrine of Scripture, systematically understood. However, since the *Sola Scriptura* principle (and with it the classic doctrine of Scripture) is under sustained criticism as this century draws to a close, we next turn to some of the current options. This brings us to the question of *Sola Scriptura* today.

### **3. *Sola Scriptura* Today**

#### **(a) *Sola Scriptura* in Positive Perspective**

First, there is still support for Scripture conceived as the whole source and norm of the church's gospel proclamation. Carl Braaten, for example, maintains that Scripture's authority lies in its unique gospel content.<sup>21</sup> Following a suggestion of the early Luther's, Braaten argues that *Sola Scriptura* is wedded to the material content of justification by faith offered in Christ. This kerygmatic idea of *Sola Scriptura* allows the modern Christian to maintain a viable view of biblical authority in a post-critical age. Braaten is comfortable with the corollary of his view: namely, that Scripture itself must be examined by a kerygmatic canon within the canon.

Second, the idea that the Scriptures are the source and norm of Christian doctrine is embraced by those, who like J. I. Packer, stand in the Reformed and evangelical tradition.<sup>22</sup> Following hints in Calvin and Owen, Packer argues for a Scripture conveying doctrine or instruction from God. Thus, in the Bible is to be found a body of divinity or an organism of doctrine that is to rule Christian worship, thought and life. Packer would accept Braaten's thesis, that the Bible is the source and norm of the church's kerygma, but lament Braaten's truncation of Scriptural normativity. For Packer, *Sola Scriptura* in doctrinal construe is a far richer deposit than Braaten allows.

Third, a foundationalist reading of *Sola Scriptura* has its proponents in the modern world.<sup>23</sup> The older view of Mosaic science or philosophy is generally unfashionable, although creation science has echoes of it. Few would look to the Bible for the chemical structure of rocks. Instead, the new foundationalists are Cartesian-like in their approach. For like Descartes, this view seeks for an indubitable (that is to say, not open to logical doubt) starting point for rational thought. Descartes's famous *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) was his propositional foundation. However, for the Reformed

and evangelical foundationalist the basic proposition is the Bible as the Word of God.

On this view then, the Bible as the Word of God supplies a rich propositional foundation for the pursuit of any of the sciences to be found in the modern university. In particular, the biblical foundation alone provides a secure truth base for confidence in the epistemological enterprise itself. Gordon Clark argues, for example, that it is the axiom of inscripturated revelation that overcomes the epistemological problems inherent in both rationalism and empiricism. Thus, the Bible believer has grounds for the knowledge enterprise in any of its dimensions, that no unbeliever can match.<sup>24</sup> This thesis too is reminiscent of Descartes's own system in which God plays the part of epistemological guarantor. In Clark's case, his approach is also Cartesian-like in its geometric mood.

In brief, *Sola Scriptura* is still construed in positive terms. What distinguishes the three contemporary views above, is the question of the limits of Scriptural normativity that is to say, whether Scriptural authority operates only at the micro level (as source and norm of the kerygma), or at the macro level (as source and norm of both kerygma and wider doctrine), or lastly, at the mega level (as source and norm of kerygma, doctrine and Christian world view or metaphysics).

#### (b) *Sola Scriptura* in Negative Perspective

In the post-critical age *Sola Scriptura* is under considerable strain. In particular, the perfections of Scripture – as the older theologians called them – are attacked. Thus, the authority, necessity, clarity and sufficiency of Scripture represent contested concepts.

First, the authority of Scripture is especially challenged by those who accept the Enlightenment critique of revealed religion. The sharp scalpel of reason, when employed with historical consciousness, reduces Scripture to one of a number of competing sources for Christian proclamation, let alone doctrine or worldview. John Macquarrie, for example, recommends a multi-stranded approach to the question of the source and norm of theology. These include: experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture and reason.<sup>25</sup> Significantly he argues for revelation as the primary source of theology, but then isolates revelation from Scripture. *Sola Scriptura* has no place in such a proposal.

Second, the necessity of Scripture is assailed by those who view the Christian truth claim as only one amongst many in the global village. The universe of religion is filled with many faiths revolving around a central power source. John Hick, in particular, challenges the notion of any necessity attaching to Scripture since on his view, the Christian faith is culturally authoritative only in the West. Indeed to his mind the older Christianity of pre-Enlightenment times (with its doctrine of the uniqueness of Scripture) needs supplanting by a 'second Christianity', that has no imperialistic pretensions.<sup>26</sup> *Sola Scriptura* is

as dated as a sixteenth century map of the southern hemisphere.

Third, the clarity of Scripture was under challenge in the Reformation period by the Roman church, which feared the splintering of Christendom into innumerable shards of warring sects. The Protestant notion of the private interpretation of Scripture – Rome feared – would lead to such an end. This fear continues even the post-Vatican II world.<sup>27</sup> Vatican II, for example, insisted that the interpretation of Scripture finally was a matter for the church as guardian of the Word of God. In fact, Scripture is part of holy tradition which has its true locus in Roman church.<sup>28</sup> Para-scriptural traditions such as the Immaculate Conception, the bodily Assumption of Mary and papal infallibility are to be judged not by any appeal to *Sola Scriptura* and its clarity, but by the *magisterium* of the church.<sup>29</sup> On this view, Scripture needs the interpreting church, if its meaning is to become clear.

The last perfection of Scripture, that of its sufficiency, is under attack by some of the participants in charismatic renewal. One of the theses of renewal is that divine prophecy can be heard today. A minority even argue that present ‘prophecy’ is on a par with the ‘Thus saith the Lord’ of Jeremiah and Isaiah.<sup>30</sup> Others offer a more nuanced view.<sup>31</sup> James Barr, a trenchant critic of most forms of conservative Christianity sees the logic of the charismatic accent on religious experience, as giving this form of Christianity twin centres of authority in a way reminiscent of mediaeval catholicism.<sup>32</sup> *Sola Scriptura* and the charismatic stress on continuing revelation stand in unclarified tension.

In sum, then, *Sola Scriptura* is under siege whether viewed as source, norm or foundation, because the perfections of Scripture themselves are contested. Scripture’s unique authority is repudiated by some (for example Macquarrie), its necessity relativized by others (for example, Hick), its clarity obfuscated by still others (for example, post-Vatican II Catholicism) and its sufficiency made questionable by others again, who look for additional avenues of revelation (for example some Charismatics).

#### **4. *Sola Scriptura* Tomorrow**

Is *Sola Scriptura*, then, still viable for the modern Christian? The slogan arose out of debate, and to many that debate seems out of place in a more ecumenically minded age. Moreover, *Sola Scriptura* – from a systematic point of view – appears to be predicated upon the so-called perfections of Scripture (authority, necessity, clarity and sufficiency). But in a post-critical environment belief in such a Scripture – it is argued by some – has questionable warrant.

It is the contention of the writer that *Sola Scriptura* remains a valuable piece of theological shorthand, which helps preserve a high view of Scripture’s epistemological importance. Moreover, the dog-

maticians of the classical Protestant period were not unaware of the need for nuancing the key concepts from which *Sola Scriptura* flows. Indeed, many of their careful distinctions merit reconsideration. Above all, *Sola Scriptura* is a catch cry that helps safeguard the Christological and soteriological sense of Scripture without which both Christian identity in and statement to the world become problematical.

(a) *Sola Scriptura* and Authority

One of the frequent criticisms of the classical Protestant view of Scripture is that the older dogmaticians divorced form and content. Instead of the authority of Scripture being wedded to its Christological and soteriological content (as in Luther), that authority became tied to the origins of Scripture in God's inspirational activity. The formal eclipsed the material. As Braaten puts the criticism: 'The shift in the grounding of biblical authority is complete, from Luther's gospel communicating Bible to Orthodoxy's inerrant Holy manuscript.'<sup>33</sup> But this judgment is close to caricature.

The older theologians carefully distinguished between the essential and integral perfection of Scripture. The essential perfection of Scripture lay in its ability to convey those truths of revelation necessary for salvation; whilst its integral perfection lay in the idea that no canonically worthy book or part thereof has been lost to the church.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, they also carefully distinguished between the Bible's historical authority (*auctoritas historica*) and normative authority (*auctoritas normativa*).<sup>35</sup> Though all that the Scriptures relate is true, not all of that truth constitutes the Christian's *credenda* or *agenda*. Thus, the older dogmaticians at times, were so bold as to suggest that even the words of an apostle, if not spoken in that capacity, are not binding.<sup>36</sup> Formal considerations as to the origins of Scripture – as summed up in the idea of inspiration – did not necessarily eclipse material ones and especially so, when soteriological matters were on view.

These nuances, if conjoined with consideration of the servant form of revelation, whether through apostle (as claypot, 2 Cor. 4:4–7), or Christ (as without comeliness, Is. 53:2) or Scripture (as lamp, Ps. 119:105), raise the question of the relation between the authority of Scripture and the divine intention which it serves.<sup>37</sup> For Scripture is covenant literature, as the traditional language of 'Old' and 'New Testament' suggests. God's covenant making activity in word and deed – centred ultimately on Christ – has generated Scripture, and Scripture in turn has served the divine purpose in establishing, maintaining and reinforcing the covenant between God and his people through his Spirit. This is a way of construing the Scripture's rôle in the *ordo cognoscendi*, that avoids the abstractness of some of the older discussion. For the disturbing feature of that discussion was not that the content of Scripture was absent from consideration, but

that it appeared to become a second order issue after the first order of one of inspiration. Some modern inerrantist defences of the Bible's authority unfortunately have a similar shape.<sup>38</sup>

(b) *Sola Scriptura* and Clarity

For the reformers and the classical dogmaticians Scripture itself provided the clue to its own interpretation and therefore, clarity. Paul's notion of prophesying in proportion or on analogy to faith – as found in Romans 12:6 – was viewed in objective terms. Paul then was writing of the faith. At least four different ways of understanding this notion can be seen in the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>39</sup> The majority Protestant view understood the analogy of faith as the analogy of the whole Scripture (*analogia totius Scripturae*) meaning in hermeneutical practice that Scripture was to interpret Scripture, Scripture was not to be interpreted against Scripture, and the dark places in Scripture were to be interpreted by the clear ones. This hermeneutic assumed the unity, coherence and internal consistency of Scripture, and yet recognized that the clarity of Scripture needed nuancing. There were acknowledged dark places in the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15–16).

However, what is appreciated today more so perhaps than in the classical Protestant period is the ancient, Middle-Eastern and literary character of the Bible. This recognition of Scripture's human particularity suggests a further nuancing of the analogy of the whole Scripture by the addition of a fourth basic rule; namely, Scripture is to be interpreted genre by genre. On this proposal the grammatico-historical exegesis of the Bible would be subsumed under the literary-historical exegesis of the Bible, and in so doing recognition made that Scripture may contain genres of literature without analogue in our own literary tradition-shaped by the Bible though it may be in part.

As in the case of the authority of Scripture so to with its clarity, some judgment as to 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 of 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. A covenantal reading of Scripture, on the other hand, not only keeps form and matter together, but also helps set the parameters of clarity.<sup>40</sup>

(c) *Sola Scriptura* and Sufficiency

Like authority and clarity, from a philosophical point of view, sufficiency is a vague word in need of delimitation. Thus we may speak of the range of authority, the degree of clarity and the measure

of sufficiency. Three possibilities, as regards the sufficiency of scripture today, have already been canvassed. The micro view delimits Scripture's sufficiency to its rôle as the source and norm of the church's gospel proclamation; the macro extends Scripture's sufficiency to include doctrine, and the mega subsumes both and adds a view of Scripture as the foundation of all human inquiry. The problem of inflated expectations is the ever present one. Once more, a covenantal reading of Scripture would help quell unrealistic expectations.

The foundationalist understanding of sufficiency especially begs the inflation question, whether in its pre-Enlightenment Mosaic science form, or post-Enlightenment epistemological one. The Bible is not an essay in metaphysics. The biblical writers show a distinct lack of interest in either first or second order philosophical questions.<sup>41</sup> One of its chief contributors himself claims to know only in part (1 Cor. 13:2) and the Book of Job stands as a constant irritant to those desirous of tidy conceptual universes.

This is not to suggest that the Bible has not any perspectives to offer the Christian metaphysician. Rather the Scripture's silences suggest that any Christian metaphysic (that is to say, grand theory of everything) will have provisionality written over most of it. The Scriptures arguably supply important control beliefs (for example, creation, man as image of God and so forth) to guide speculative thinking, but the project itself remains heuristic *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>42</sup> More than one Christian thinker has fallen for the transcendental illusion of which Kant speaks (in effect, to try to think all of God's thoughts after him).

#### (d) *Sola Scriptura* and Necessity

The classical position on the necessity of Scripture was not an attempt to argue that without the Bible there would have been no church. Rather, the older theologians maintained that the Scriptures were necessary for the well-being of the church.<sup>43</sup> In more formal terms, the well-being of the church (*bene esse*) is – by the free decision of God – internally related to the Scriptures, but not so the being of the church (*esse*).<sup>44</sup> Again, form and content must not be severed. For *Sola Scriptura* makes most sense when the necessity of Scripture is construed as a way of preserving the other *solas* of Reformation fame (*sola gratia, sola fide, solo Christo and soli Deo gloria*) and therefore, the well-being of the church.

On this view, *Sola Scriptura* as the source and norm of the church's *kerygma* is of first order importance and other uses of *Sola Scriptura* are to be ranked accordingly. Does this suggest a canon within a canon? No, if what is intended is not a critical scalpel to cut away the supposedly dead flesh of Scripture, but rather a hermeneutical procedure for distinguishing between the weightier and lighter mat-

ters – a distinction our Lord himself used in reading his own Scripture (Matt. 23:23).<sup>45</sup>

The present section has been an exercise in internal criticism. The traditional notions of the perfections of Scripture have been treated as a given, but then reviewed and nuanced in terms of the servant character of revelation with regard to its authority, the literary nature of the Bible with regard to its clarity, the importance of realistic expectations with regard to its sufficiency, and the weightier matters with regard to its necessity. Moreover, it has been argued that each of the perfections of Scripture needs viewing through the prism of the divine purpose; namely, God binding himself to his people by way of covenant in Christ through his Spirit.<sup>46</sup> Such a covenantal reading brings in its train the motifs of grace, faith and glory.

## 5. Conclusions

The doctrine of an authoritative Scripture is under attack in the modern world. Pannenberg speaks of the crisis of the Scripture principle. *Sola Scriptura* is likewise under challenge. Our Reformers and their more scholastic followers viewed the Bible as the source and norm of their *kerygma*, their doctrine and in some cases, even the foundation of their science. The doctrine of Scripture that emerges from this period is a sophisticated theological construct, employing both careful argument and fine distinctions. As a project in doctrinal construct it parallels the much earlier one of the Trinity in many important respects; although the earlier doctrine deals with the *principium essendi*, whilst the later one with the *principium cognoscendi*.

*Sola Scriptura* – in systematic perspective – flows from the so-called perfections of Scripture which include authority, necessity, clarity and sufficiency. In our own day each of the meanings of *Sola Scriptura* delineated above, kerygmatic doctrinal and foundationalist has its advocates. Yet, the perfections of Scripture themselves are rejected by others in whole or part. Thus, some reconsideration of the classic formulation is entirely proper. Certain lines of developing or reviewing the perfections of Scripture were suggested: the notions of purpose, covenant, servant-form and genre appreciation were stressed in particular. Of special importance was the accent that *Sola Scriptura* ought not to be considered in isolation from the other *solas*. Form and content are symbiotic here. For, with apologies to Kant, *Sola Scriptura* without Christ is empty, but Christ without Scripture, whose son is he?

## NOTES

- 1 W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, (London, 1970), vol. 1, p. 4. Developments in the last quarter century have not altered the accuracy of Pannenberg's observation. D. A. Carson's essay in D. A. Carson & John D. Woodbridge (edd.), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids, 1986), pp. 5–48, is a useful update of the *status questionis*.
- 2 See James I. Packer, 'Sola Fide: The Reformed Doctrine of Justification' in R. C. Sproul (ed.), *Soli Deo Gloria* (U.S.A., 1976), pp. 11–13.
- 3 See R. C. Sproul, 'Sola Scriptura: Crucial To Evangelicalism' in James Montgomery Boice (ed.), *The Foundations of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, 1978), p. 103.
- 4 Carl E. Braaten, 'Can We Still Hold the Principle of "Sola Scriptura"?' in *Dialog*, volume 20, Summer, 1981, pp. 189–190. For a fine treatment of both Luther and Calvin's view of Scripture and *Sola Scriptura* see B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestant and the New* (Edinburgh, 1982), Chapter 3. Gerrish points out the continuity of Luther (both early and later) with the mediaeval church in believing that the Bible 'contains revealed doctrine', p. 64. The Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim thesis as set out in *The Authority And Interpretation Of the Bible* (San Francisco, 1979), especially pp. 75–88, needs to be critically examined in the light of Gerrish's treatment.
- 5 In Carl E. Braaten, *op cit.* p. 190.
- 6 *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge, no date), p. 613.
- 7 *Ibid.* especially pp. 575–576, 590.
- 8 See John S. Coolidge, *The Pauline Renaissance in England* (Oxford, 1970), Chapter 1; A. S. McGrade and B. Vickers (edd.), *Of Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (London, 1975), p. 14 and Iain Murray, 'Scriptura and Things Indifferent' in *Diversity in Unity* (Papers read at the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, December 1963) pp. 15–35.
- 9 Quoted in J. Ayre (ed.), *The Works of John Whitgift, D.D.* (Cambridge, 1851), Vol. 1, p. 189.
- 10 *Ibid.* Also see J. H. New, *Anglican and Puritan* (Stanford, 1965), p. 26. In particular see H. G. Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (London, 1984), pp. 114–117, 127.
- 11 Of particular importance here is J. C. Spalding's 'Restitution as a Normative Factor for Puritan Dissent', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 44, 1976, pp. 47–63. Spalding shows that for puritans, such as Cartwright, polity constituted the third note of the church and Scripture provided the pattern; whereas conformists, such as Whitgift, were content with the two notes of the right administration of the word and the sacraments as required by Scripture.
- 12 Richard S. Westfall, *Science and Religion in the Seventeenth Century* (Ann Arbor, 1973), p. 21.
- 13 Quoted in R. Hookyaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids, 1972), p. 130. Also see the helpful essay by John D. Woodbridge, 'Does the Bible Teach Science?' in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July–September, 1985, pp. 195–208.
- 14 *Ibid.* pp. 116, 137.
- 15 B. B. Warfield's *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia 1970), sixth printing, remains the standard work.
- 16 For an account of the relation between the Reformation and evangelicalism (as seen for example in B. B. Warfield), in contradistinction to the eighteenth century awakening and evangelicalism, and to the modernist-fundamentalist debates of this century and evangelicalism, see Donald W. Dayton's essay in Robert K. Johnston (ed.), *The Use of the Bible/Evangelical Options* (Atlanta, 1985), pp. 121–136.
- 17 See Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, 1978) pp. 12–46 especially, for a judicious anthology of classical Protestant thinking on the topic of Holy Scripture. For the purposes of this essay the writer has concentrated on Reformed, rather than Lutheran scholasticism. On the importance of understand-

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- ing the Protestant scholastics Paul Tillich points out that 'Orthodox theology was and still is the solid basis of all later developments . . .' quoted in B. L. Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage* (Waco, 1973), p. 53.
- 18 B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia, 1968), p. 22.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 For an account of these perfections see L. Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1979), pp. 162–169.
- 21 C. Braaten, *op. cit.*, pp. 189–194.
- 22 J. I. Packer in Robert C. Johnston (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 35–55. Also see his "'Sola Scriptura" in History and Today' in John Warwick Montgomery (ed.), *God's Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis, 1974), p. 43f.
- 23 On the nature of foundationalism philosophically considered see N. Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, 1984), Second Edition. For an application to the inerrancy debate see Timothy R. Phillips, 'The Argument for Inerrancy: An Analysis' in *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, June, 1979, pp. 80–88.
- 24 See Gordon H. Clark's three important works in this respect, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy* (The Craig Press, 1973), *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids, 1981) and Ronald H. Nash (ed.), *The Philosophy of Gordon Clark* (Philadelphia, 1968) especially Part One. Interestingly, Muslims have a similar view of the Qur'an. Badru D. Kateregga writes:
- There is no subject which the Qur'an does not discuss. Theology, jurisprudence, science, and history are some of the major subjects the Qur'an deals with. That is why for many centuries, the Qur'an has been the scientific manual and the text book for acquiring liberal education in the Muslim world. Although the Qur'an does not describe all aspects of knowledge in complete details, it is nevertheless the source and foundation of all true wisdom and knowledge. It is Allah's Word.
- Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *Islam and Christianity* (Grand Rapids, 1981), p. 29.
- 25 John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London, 1977), Revised Edition, Chapter 1 especially.
- 26 John Hick, *The Second Christianity*, (London, 1985), in particular the Preface and Chapters 2 and 4.
- 27 *Lesson Three: The Bible* a publication of the Catholic Enquiry Centre (Sydney, 1980), pp. 42–43.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Philip St. Romain, *Catholic Answers to Fundamentalists' Questions* (Missouri, 1984), Chapters 1 and 2.
- 30 J. Rodman Williams quoted in J. F. MacArthur, *The Charismatics* (Zondervan, 1978), pp. 20–21. MacArthur provides evidence that Rodman Williams himself has had second thoughts.
- 31 For example, see M. Harper, *Let My People Grow* (London, 1977), p. 67.
- 32 James Barr, 'Religious Fundamentalism' in *St. Mark's Review*, No. 133, March 1988, pp. 3–10, especially p. 8.
- 33 C. Braaten makes this point strongly, *op. cit.*, p. 190. Also see Timothy R. Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 84 and E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (London, 1970), pp. 107–113.
- 34 For example, Heidegger in H. Heppel, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
- 35 L. Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 164.
- 36 *Ibid.*, for the examples of Voetius and Grosheide.
- 37 Both the servant-form and servant-function of Scripture should act as a caution against over-tight expectations, as far as both the precision of its language is concerned, and the degree of self-evident authority it exhibits. If, for example, the Incarnate Son Himself could be misread as Be-elzebul at work, how much more likely then, that the Scriptures too are open to misreading, as far as their nature is concerned. At this point the *principium cognoscendi externum* needs balancing by

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- the *principium cognoscendi internum*. Word and Spirit are the vital-nexus. Thus not only form and content must not be separated, neither should the rôle of the Spirit, from both. An important discussion of the servant form of Scripture is found in G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, 1975), Chapter 7.
- 38 For example, E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (London, 1972).
- 39 See H. Blocher, 'The "Analogy of Faith" in the Study of Scripture' in Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *The Challenge of Evangelical Theology* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. 17–38.
- 40 For examples of covenantal readings of Scripture see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (Exeter, 1981) and W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Exeter, 1984). For an application see the writer's 'A Responsible Lifestyle In Old Testament Perspective' in *The Reformed Theological Review*, Vol. xli, January–April, No. 1, pp. 1–10, in which particular attention is given to the notions of divine intention, covenant and hermeneutics.
- 41 For instance, the Bible writers evince little interest in a first order question such as, What is a miracle?, nor second order ones such as, What does it mean to speak of a miracle?
- 42 N. Wolterstorff is helpful on this point, *op. cit.* In the writer's own view, a case can be made for a heuristic foundationalism that is, in principle, open to both criticism and revision. Such a foundationalism would be applicable to both the systematic theology itself and Christian metaphysical speculation: *pace* Timothy R. Phillips, *op. cit.*
- 43 R. C. Sproul has some wise comments to make here, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–111. Also see H. Heppel, *op. cit.*, p. 32 and L. Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
- 44 An internal relationship is one without which X could not be X. So as regards the church arguably it could not be without the gospel. However, it may be that that gospel is passed down by word of mouth, rather than by a book. But how much healthier it would be as a church if it had the book. See B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia, 1970), pp. 210–211.
- 45 See G. Ebeling, *The Word of God and Tradition* (London, 1968), pp. 122–144. A masterly discussion.
- 46 A covenantal reading also requires that systematic theology (with its *loci communes* approach) be informed by a biblical theology, that takes 'salvation history' (with its promise-fulfilment structure) seriously and therefore, eschatology seriously. Thus, the Scriptures are to be approached both extra-textually with logical categories, and intra-textually in terms of their own unfolding dynamics.