

## *SOLA SCRIPTURA: A COMPARISON OF LUTHER AND THE ADVENTIST UNDERSTANDING*

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*Sola scriptura* was one of the principles of the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> Although not unique to Martin Luther, it is a concept popularized by him.<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest references to the principle of *sola scriptura* occurs during a debate between Luther and John Eck at Leipzig in 1519. Luther declared, “No Christian believer can be forced [to believe an article of faith] beyond Holy Scripture.”<sup>3</sup> The same idea is embodied in his defense at Worms on April 18, 1521:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since

<sup>1</sup> *Sola scriptura* is generally accepted to mean that the Bible alone is the authority in matters of faith and practice. The other two principles that complete the three *solae* are *sola gratia* (grace alone) and *sola fide* (faith alone).

<sup>2</sup> See Arthur Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word—Martin Luther: Doctor of Sacred Scripture* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1969), 31–40. Arthur Skevington Wood labors to explain that Luther is indebted in many ways to his predecessors and, especially, to Augustine of Hippo, William of Occam, and later the Occamist theologians regarding his view of the Scriptures. Moreover, *sola scriptura* as a theological formula is a by-product of the Reformation rather than its presupposition. See *Ibid.*; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 153; cf. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: It's Historical and Systematic Development*, ed. and trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 22, 23. The phrase *sola scriptura* per se is not found in the works of Luther. However, the idea that the Scripture stands supreme in authority over the church and other religious authorities is central in his more developed theology.

<sup>3</sup> Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 123.

it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. "I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen."<sup>4</sup>

Seventh-day Adventists affirm the *sola scriptura* principle. They have frequently been called "the people of the book" and place a high regard upon Scripture. However, what Luther meant by *sola scriptura* is a contested subject among church historians and theologians.<sup>5</sup> This chapter explores and compares the meaning of Luther's *sola scriptura* principle and the understanding of this principle by Seventh-day Adventists.

## 1. Luther and *Sola Scriptura*

Several recent studies maintain that it is a misconception, or at least an oversimplification, to argue that for the Reformers the Scripture was the sole authority and that tradition had no role.<sup>6</sup> For example, Irena Backus, states, "It is by now a well-known fact that the Reformers did not reject the tradition of the Early Church, which in their eyes was to be sharply distinguished from the corruptions of medieval ecclesiastical structures."<sup>7</sup> These developments necessitate a more careful look at what the term *sola scriptura* meant for Luther. To understand this phrase, it is necessary to place the issue in its historical context.

### 1.1. *Sola Scriptura* Principle in Historical Context

During Luther's time, the issue was not the authority of Scripture itself but rather, to what extent does this authority compare with the Roman

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer 2*, vol. 32 of *Luther's Works*, ed. George W. Forell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 113.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the meaning of *sola scriptura* see, James R. Payton Jr., *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 132–159; John C. Peckham, "Sola Scriptura: Reductio ad absurdum?" *Trinity Journal* 35.2 (2014): 195–223; Aleksander S. Santrac, "The Sola Scriptura Principle in the Current Debate," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 24.1 (2013): 107–126; Kwabena Donkor, "Contemporary Responses to Sola Scriptura: Implications for Adventist Theology," *Reflections: The BRI Newsletter* 41 (January 2013): 5–8.

<sup>6</sup> Payton, *Getting the Reformation Wrong*, 133.

<sup>7</sup> Irena Backus, *The Disputation of Baden, 1526 and Bern, 1528: Neutralizing the Early Church; Studies in Reformed Theology and History* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary Press, 1993), 81, <http://scdc.library.ptsem.edu/mets/mets.aspx?src=SRTH199311&div=11&img=3>.

Catholic Church and its leaders. Catholic leaders taught, "The unwritten tradition could just be as authoritative as the Scriptures."<sup>8</sup> At times it could even be superior since it was the church's creation. Luther, as priest, adhered to this belief during his early life. Even after posting his *Ninety-Five Theses*, he maintained a high regard for the writings of the church fathers and papal decrees. He declared:

First, I testify that I desire to say or maintain absolutely nothing except, first of all, what is in the Holy Scriptures and can be maintained from them; and then what is in and found from the writings of the church fathers and is accepted by the Roman church and preserved both in the canons and papal decrees.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, others maintained that the pope or a church council represented the ultimate authority to determine the meaning of the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.2. Luther's View of the Church Fathers and Their Teachings

Luther did not altogether discard tradition. He fought against the radical reformers<sup>11</sup> who wanted to eliminate all church traditions. He warned: "One needs a more cautious, discreet spirit, which attacks the accretion which threatens the temple without destroying the temple of God itself."<sup>12</sup> And to those who accused him of rejecting all the teachings of the church fathers, he answered,

I do not reject them. But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they have erred, as men will; therefore, I am ready to trust them only when they give me evidence for their opinion from Scripture, which has never erred.<sup>13</sup>

Luther, after several disputations against papal representatives, rejected the common understanding that "the teaching of the Scripture and the

<sup>8</sup> Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 385.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer 1*, vol. 31 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 83, 93, 94.

<sup>10</sup> Wood, *Captive to the Word*, 120.

<sup>11</sup> The radical reformers or Anabaptists were more consistent in applying the *sola scriptura* principle. See Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 155.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 346.

<sup>13</sup> Luther, *Career of the Reformer 2*, 11.

teaching of the Roman Catholic Church were necessarily identical."<sup>14</sup> He wrote, "What else do I contend for but to bring everyone to understand the difference between the divine Scripture and human teaching or custom."<sup>15</sup> The Holy Scripture is "more reliable than any other writings"; wherein one can refer to judge all other writings, for it is the only "true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth."<sup>16</sup> He advised that "the Sacred Scriptures must be sharply distinguished from those that have been invented by men in the Church, it matters not how eminent they be for saintliness and scholarship."<sup>17</sup>

Luther argued for the primacy of Scriptures over the writings of the church fathers but at the same time upheld their value. In 1521, he wrote, "We Gentiles must not value the writings of our fathers as highly as the Holy Scripture, but as worth a little less."<sup>18</sup> He added, "The teachings of the Fathers are useful only to lead us to the Scriptures, as they were led, and then we must hold to the Scriptures alone."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, he explained,

The writings of all the holy fathers should be read only for a time, in order that through them we may be led to the Holy Scriptures.... The dear fathers wished, by their writings, to lead us to the Scriptures, but we use them as to be led away from the Scriptures, though the Scriptures alone are our vineyard in which we ought all to work and toil.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Wood, *Captive to the Word*, 120; cf. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 188. According to Ernst Zeeden, "Luther was not breaking new ground when he turned to the Bible, but only when he cut the Bible off from the pope and Church, or subordinated them." Ernst W. Zeeden, *The Legacy of Luther: Martin Luther and the Reformation* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1954), quoted in Wood, *Captive to the Word*, 119.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, "Answer to the Superchristian, Superspiritual, and Superlearned Book of Goat Emser," quoted in Hugh T. Kerr, ed., *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Luther, *Career of the Reformer* 2, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," quoted in Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church, 1539," in *Selected Writings of Martin Luther, 1529-1546*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 243.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, "Answer to the Superchristian," 14.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, "An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility," quoted in Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, 13.

### 1.3. Luther and Religious Authority

Luther did not despise church authority without qualification. His strong objection was against the claim of the pope that the church has authority above the Word of God and therefore must be its arbiter.<sup>21</sup> For him, the Scripture is its own interpreter and, therefore, it must be interpreted by comparing Scripture with Scripture.<sup>22</sup> He protested against the Catholic teaching that the Scripture is insufficient “apart from the treasury of popes and councils.”<sup>23</sup> Contrary to the popular belief of his time, he disagreed that the church is above the Scripture. Instead, he believed that the Word of God bore and nourished the church. Therefore, “the Word of God is incomparably superior to the Church, and in this Word the Church, being a creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make, but only to be decreed, ordained, and made.”<sup>24</sup>

Wood attests that Luther profusely quoted from the church fathers, but he subjected their authority to the Scripture and refused to accept them whenever they appeared to contradict the Word of God.<sup>25</sup> According to Luther, “All the holy fathers, when they speak apart from the Scriptures are fallible as anyone else.”<sup>26</sup> He added, “I will not listen to the Church or the fathers or the apostles unless they bring and teach the pure Word of God.”<sup>27</sup> He quoted the apostle Paul in Gal 1:18 when he emphasized that any person (regardless of status or rank) and even angels are suspect when they preach contrary to the Word of God.<sup>28</sup> Even professed

<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 1-4*, vol. 26 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 51.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, vol. 9 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), 21.

<sup>23</sup> Michael S. Horton, “Scripture Alone: Luther’s Doctrine of Scripture,” in *The Legacy of Luther*, R. C. Sproul and Stephen J. Nichols, eds. (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2016), 12.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament 2*, vol. 36 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 107.

<sup>25</sup> See Wood, *Captive to the Word*, 125.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther, “Avoiding the Doctrine of Men and a Reply to the Texts Cited in Defense of the Doctrines of Men, 1522,” in *Selected Writings of Martin Luther, 1520-1523*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 204.

<sup>27</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, 67.

<sup>28</sup> See Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John Chapters 6-8*, vol. 23 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 191-192.

prophets who work wonders and miracles must be judged “in the light of God’s Word.”<sup>29</sup>

#### 1.4. Summary of Luther and *Sola Scriptura*

The idea of *sola scriptura* for Luther does not mean that the Scripture is the *sole* religious authority. It is evident that the above statements were not intended to mean that Luther despised all the teachings of the church fathers. Although he made it clear that the Scripture must be above creeds and papal decrees, his acceptance of church authority and the creeds depended upon their biblical authority.<sup>30</sup>

James R. Payton Jr. aptly summarizes Luther’s understanding of *sola scriptura* by stating that, for Luther, “Scripture was the *only unquestioned* religious authority. It did not mean that Scripture was the *only* religious authority—as has often been assumed or misunderstood in subsequent Protestantism.”<sup>31</sup>

For Luther, *sola scriptura* meant that the Word of God is the ultimate standard, norm, and the proper touchstone and final authority for faith and practice. All other authorities must be judged and evaluated in light of the Scripture. Moreover, for him the Word of God is self-sufficient. It is

<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John Chapters 14-16*, vol. 24 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1961), 75; cf. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, 383.

<sup>30</sup> See Martin Luther, *Church and Ministry* 3, vol. 41 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 123. Alberto R. Timm observes that, for the magisterial reformers like Luther and John Calvin, *sola scriptura* does not mean the rejection of other sources of religious knowledge. Alberto R. Timm, “*Sola Scriptura* and Ellen G. White: Historical Reflections,” in *The Gift of Prophecy in Scripture and History*, ed. Alberto R. Timm and Dwain N. Esmond (Silver Spring, MD: Review & Herald, 2015), 288.

<sup>31</sup> Payton, *Getting the Reformation Wrong*, 13 (Emphases in original). Frank M. Hasel reaches a similar conclusion. He writes, “When Luther maintained the principle of *sola scriptura*, he was not suggesting that the tradition of the church was without value. Rather, he was arguing a case of relative clarity and weight. In other words, if a conflict arises in the interpretation of faith, then the Scripture carries the authority that transcends and judges any of the church’s traditions.” Frank M. Hasel, “Pre-suppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 37.

its own interpreter and should never be beholden to any other authority for authentication.<sup>32</sup>

## 2. Seventh-day Adventist Understanding of *Sola Scriptura*

Seventh-day Adventists adhere to the *sola scriptura* principle.<sup>33</sup> In the 1872 declaration of fundamental beliefs, Uriah Smith wrote, “The Holy Scriptures, of the Old and New Testaments, were given by inspiration of God, contain a full revelation of his will to man, and are the only infallible rule of faith and practice.”<sup>34</sup> However, Adventist thinkers have differed in their understanding of *sola scriptura*.<sup>35</sup> In order to grasp this Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle, I will examine the writings of Ellen G. White in order to establish an Adventist baseline view. It is important to note that when she referenced the idea of *sola scriptura*, she connected the idea to the Reformation understanding of this topic. She wrote, “In our time there is a wide departure from their doctrines and precepts, and there is a need to return to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Although Luther asserted the *sola scriptura* principle, it is evident that he did not agree with the principle of *tota Scriptura*, the idea that all Scriptures is equally inspired. He calls the Book of James the “epistle of straw” for the reason that it seemingly contradicts the idea of righteousness by faith alone. Luther wrote, “Away with James.... His authority is not great enough to cause me to abandon the doctrine of faith and to deviate from the authority of the other apostles and the entire Scripture.” Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Shultz (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1966), 81. On the other hand, Adventists assert *tota Scriptura* in consideration that “all Scriptures” are equally inspired and are profitable to the believers.

<sup>33</sup> See Hasel, “Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture,” 36.

<sup>34</sup> *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist, 1872), 5, [http://seventhdayhomechurchfellowships.org/Resources/1872\\_-\\_Statements\\_of\\_Belief.pdf](http://seventhdayhomechurchfellowships.org/Resources/1872_-_Statements_of_Belief.pdf). This statement is accepted to be the declaration of the Adventist adherence to the *sola scriptura* principle.

<sup>35</sup> For example, see Tim Crosby, “Viewpoint: Why I Don’t Believe in Sola Scriptura,” *Ministry* (October 1987): 11–15; Woodrow W. Whidden, “Sola Scriptura, Inerrantist Fundamentalism, and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Is ‘No Creed but the Bible’ a Workable Solution?” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 35.2 (1997): 211–226.

<sup>36</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 204, 205.

## 2.1. Ellen G. White and *Sola Scriptura*

White consistently affirmed the *sola scriptura* principle. For her, “the Bible and the Bible alone, is our rule of faith.”<sup>37</sup> In another place, she wrote,

The Bible is its own expositor. One passage will prove to be a key that will unlock other passages, and in this way light will be shed upon the hidden meaning of the word. By comparing different texts treating on the same subject, viewing their bearing on every side, the true meaning of the Scriptures will be made evident.<sup>38</sup>

Contrary to her detractors, White never claimed that her writings should ever be considered as equal to the Scripture. She is emphatic on this point:

God’s Word is the unerring standard. The Testimonies [her writings] are not to take the place of the Word.... Let all prove their positions from the Scriptures and substantiate every point they claim as truth from the revealed Word of God.<sup>39</sup>

In comparison to the Bible, she claimed that her writings were a “lesser light” to lead people to the “greater light.”<sup>40</sup> She penned that “if the Testimonies speak not according to the word of God, reject them.”<sup>41</sup> She added, “Our position and faith is in the Bible. And never do we want any soul to bring in the Testimonies ahead of the Bible”<sup>42</sup> and that the Testimonies

<sup>37</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1938), 84; cf. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1958), 2:85.

<sup>38</sup> Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1923), 187. Hasel comments that to take *sola scriptura* as a hermeneutical principle “does not negate the insight from other fields of study, such as biblical archaeology, anthropology, sociology, or history, which may illumine some biblical aspects and the background of scriptural passages, contributing to a better understanding of the meaning of biblical text. Nor does it exclude the help of other sources in the task of interpretation, such as biblical lexicons, dictionaries, concordances, and other books and commentaries. However, in the proper interpretation of the Bible, the text of Scripture has priority over all other aspects, sciences, and secondary helps. Other viewpoints have to be carefully evaluated from the standpoint of Scripture as a whole.” Hasel, “Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture,” 36.

<sup>39</sup> Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1946), 256.

<sup>40</sup> Ellen G. White, *Colporteur Ministry* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1953), 125.

<sup>41</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:691.

<sup>42</sup> White, *Evangelism*, 256.



would not be necessary if God's people diligently study the Scriptures.<sup>43</sup> She explained, "The Testimonies are not to give new light, but to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed."<sup>44</sup>

## 2.2. Ellen G. White and the Use of Other Sources

White's adherence to the *sola scriptura* principle does not mean that she never considered other sources. She cautioned, though, that

many think that they must consult commentaries on the Scriptures in order to understand the meaning of the word of God, and we would not take the position that commentaries should not be studied; but it will take much discernment to discover the truth of God under the mass of the word of men.<sup>45</sup>

She consistently maintained that the Scripture is the ultimate gauge of faith and practice. Furthermore, she affirmed that "the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines, and the basis of all reforms,"<sup>46</sup> and all other teachings and practices must pass the test of the Scriptures.<sup>47</sup>

## 2.3. Summary of Ellen G. White's Understanding of *Sola Scriptura*

White understood *sola scriptura* to mean that the Bible and the Bible alone is the foundation of Christian faith and practice. However, this does not mean that she disregarded other religious materials. She claimed that her writings did not have the same function as the Scripture but, instead, were intended to lead people back to the Word of God. Even though she

<sup>43</sup> White, *Testimonies*, 2:605–606. White claimed that her testimonies are to point people to the Scriptures that they have neglected. White, *Evangelism*, 257.

<sup>44</sup> White, *Testimonies*, 2:605, 606.

<sup>45</sup> White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 187, 188.

<sup>46</sup> White, *Great Controversy*, 595.

<sup>47</sup> According to White, "The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creed or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain 'Thus says the Lord' in its support." White, *Great Controversy*, 595; cf. White, *Testimonies*, 5:575.

maintained the principle that Scripture interprets itself, she allowed for the fact that other biblical tools and resources can be helpful as an aid to study the Bible. She emphasized that the Scripture must always be given priority over other sources of authority in order to determine the meaning of the text.

### 3. Conclusion

Luther and Seventh-day Adventists share three main commonalities about the principle of *sola scriptura*. First, both decisively affirm that the Bible is the only infallible and final touchstone of faith and practice. It means that all doctrine must pass the test of the Scripture in order to be considered valid. The Bible is the ultimate test of religious knowledge. Second, both agree that the Scripture is its own interpreter. It is not dependent upon external authorities or science to authenticate its claim. A difficult Scriptural passage must be understood in the light of the witness of Scripture as a whole. Finally, in application of the *sola scriptura* principle, any teaching or doctrine that does not pass the test of the Scripture must be rejected.